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THE  
ROSCOE  
MITCHELL  
ISSUE

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# FINDING KIN

Nate Wooley

In quiet moments—introspective, diffuse, tired moments—I experiment with the idea of a personal catechism: an impossible collection of ethics, philosophy, and aesthetics that could point to a “right” path for a musician, an artist, and a limited human being. In recent years, these little daydreams have developed into—if I follow my metaphor—a unique *Lives of the Saints*: an imaginary book filled with lives lived, and work done, by people that have gotten the closest to my ideals. Wendell Berry, Ron Miles, Anne Carson, Agnes Martin, Thomas Merton, Nan Shepherd have all had a chapter in this hypothetical work—a dubious honor—absorbing my adulation as I try and figure out the best way to finish this life of mine, now over half-way done.

But let me back down from that high-flown comparison. It may be better to think of these people as “kin,” not in the sense of traditional genetic relationships, but as a group of souls related by their tread on a similar path. This is not family through shared blood, but through shared existence. And I honor that kinship by trying to live up to their example, by providing a future path-taker with another set of footprints to follow.

I am old enough to have had availability shape my education. In my pre-internet record-collecting life, Anthony Braxton records were plentiful; Art Ensemble of Chicago releases were more rare; Roscoe Mitchell records were myth. And so my upbringing created, as they all do, a bubble of hidden information. It wasn’t until I was living in New York that I began trying to piece together what I had missed. And it wasn’t until starting the research on this issue that I understood how important Mitchell is as an instrumentalist, an improviser, a composer, an educator, a painter, and a path-taker.

Sam Weinberg—who put together a rigorous primer on Roscoe’s life and music for this issue—sent me eight hours of early Mitchell and Art Ensemble recordings as I began curating SA29’s articles, and I ordered every recent recording of Mitchell’s I could find. (This collecting of new-to-me music is my favorite part of every issue’s research.) These records became the foundation for a burgeoning, but powerful, need to discover what was behind Mitchell’s singularity.

As I was still listening, articles began arriving in my inbox. Musicians that I respected, and who I knew had a deep respect for Mitchell, were telling me (us) exactly *what it is* that makes his music such a vigorous force. Almost all of these musician-writers pointed to Mitchell’s iconic mid-1970s “Nonaah” solo performance as a catalyst for their own music. I listened to my new recordings again, and the weight of Mitchell as an instrumentalist was eclipsed by his musicianship.

Zeena Parkins shared her interviews with the students and faculty closest to Mitchell at Mills College. Although not all of these were able to be included here due to space, the words I read from those who had spent time with the improviser and composer as student-collaborators opened my eyes to something new. The conversations present Mitchell as that rare type who wakes up every morning ready to share with others; one who understands that sharing is a two-way street. Mitchell, in these interviews, seems to be as open to learning from his students as they are from him. I sat and took a fresh listen to music made by an artist interested in living with the world and learning as much as he can from it.

Finally, the interviews. These discussions between Mitchell and his colleagues about music, painting, and life draw him as simultaneously imposing and welcoming. A chat about how visual and sonic arts feed each other sits next to lessons for easier travel and what dogs can teach us. The elements of who Mitchell is—a great instrumentalist, musician, artist, educator—finally coincide as a three-dimensional, fully technicolor human being. I listen again to the now-not-so-new-to-me records, and my imaginary book makes room for a new chapter: Roscoe Mitchell becomes kin.

This issue would not have been possible without the help of John McCowen, who assisted by pointing me toward possible contributors and putting me in initial contact with Roscoe. John Corbett has also been a great help in gathering information on Roscoe's paintings (as well as providing the sort of deep background on this music that we all expect from him). This issue coincides with a show of Roscoe's paintings at Corbett vs. Dempsey in Chicago. Roscoe was in preparation for this show as we prepared the issue as you will read throughout.

Finally, thank you to Roscoe who has been patient throughout the whole process, which always takes longer than planned. It is my great hope that what lies within lives up to his expectations.

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# THE FLOW OF THINGS: ROSCOE MITCHELL'S LIFE IN MUSIC

Sam Weinberg

I.

Roscoe Mitchell Jr. was born August 3, 1940, in Chicago, Illinois, the son of Roscoe Mitchell Sr. and Ida Carter. The family lived on the corner of 60th and State Street, near Washington Park, which at the time was an epicenter of black cultural activity for the Bronzeville neighborhood in Chicago's South Side. For the musically inclined young Mitchell, being so close to the performances in Washington Park—and the adjacent clubs which populated the area of 63rd and Cottage Grove—provided ample fodder for his nascent musical curiosities.

Mitchell's family was religiously observant and attended the weekly Spiritualist Church, where the services were conducted by Mitchell's uncle, Reverend Charles Commodore Carter. Mitchell remembers: "I used to really enjoy the music in the church. At that time I wasn't that interested in the sermons."<sup>1</sup>

But this musical interest was more than reinforced at home. Mitchell describes his father as a "singer, and he was one . . . I guess you could group him into the group of singers that they call crooners. He also used to do a thing where he would imitate instruments."<sup>2</sup> His parents also had open ears to the popular music of the day—which in Mitchell's telling was quite normal, and indeed "common knowledge." Played at home were hits by Nat King Cole (Mitchell's mother's friend from high school), James Moody's "It Might As Well Be Spring," and others.<sup>3</sup>

Despite Roscoe Sr.'s wish for his son to take up singing, it was Mitchell's older brother Norman—with his extensive record collection of "many, many 78 records"—who turned Mitchell onto Lester Young, Charlie Parker, and other saxophone innovators and was ultimately responsible for his younger brother's choice to begin an instrumental practice of his own.

Shortly thereafter, Mitchell's devotion to jazz became all-consuming. He elaborates: "For me, that was a weird time, because after I started listening to jazz I didn't want to listen to anything else anymore. There was a certain coolness that went along with that—you understood jazz, that made you cooler."

During a brief relocation with his family to Milwaukee, Mitchell began playing the clarinet at West Division High School and continued these studies at Englewood High School when the family returned to their old neighborhood in Chicago. It was at Englewood where he first took up the saxophone. By his own admission, he was a "late-starter." Mitchell offered his services when the Englewood dance band needed a baritone saxophonist<sup>4</sup> and then, looking for a further challenge, borrowed a fellow student's alto saxophone, wherein he truly fell in love—"the alto was the instrument that really caught my interest."

Although no formal jazz education was on offer at Englewood, Mitchell fortuitously became friends with a peer who was already an esteemed saxophonist, Donald “Hippmo” Myrick, who would go on to gain notoriety as the saxophonist for funk supergroup Earth, Wind, and Fire. Recalling his relationship with Myrick, (whom he later honored on his 1995 Delmark album, *Hey Donald*), Mitchell recalls: “[Myrick] kind of took me under his wing, because he already knew all the stuff. He was a fully accomplished musician in high school.”

Mitchell’s commitment to music was unquestionable and intense, and consequently he decided to enlist in the Army with the explicit aim of joining the band. Despite his relative musical inexperience, Mitchell was a proficient enough saxophonist to join the U.S. Army Europe Band, stationed in Heidelberg, Germany, where he stayed for three years. The Army provided Mitchell with a congenial atmosphere: several competent saxophonists who challenged him and with whom he could swap notes and refine his technique—like Nathaniel Davis and Joseph Stevenson—and plenty of time to practice. The Army allowed him to “function as a professional musician twenty-four hours a day.” Concurrently, Mitchell began to gain concrete playing experience performing at Cave 54, a veritable wellspring of fledgling talent, including pianist and vibraphonist Karl Berger, trombonist Albert Mangelsdorff, and saxophonist Bent Jaedig.

But it was the experience of hearing fellow serviceman Albert Ayler that had the force of revelation: “[Hearing Ayler] was a big influence on me. Because at that time, I was aware of Ornette Coleman’s music, but I have to say, even as a musician at that time, I didn’t fully understand what Ornette was doing. The thing about Albert Ayler, when I first met him, one thing I knew about him, I knew basically what was happening with the saxophone, and I knew he had a tremendous sound on the instrument, and that lured me in to want to try to figure out what it is that he was doing on the saxophone. I remember once there was a session. They were all playing the blues, and Albert Ayler, he played the blues straight, like for two or three choruses, and then started to stretch it out. And that really helped me. That was kind of a major mark for me musically, just to be able to see that that could really be done.”

After hearing Ayler that night and realizing that there “may be another way of doing things,” Mitchell returned to Chicago with a career as a musician set firmly in his sights. The form that this would take was unknown to the young Mitchell, and there’s little way that the saxophonist could have predicted the people he was to meet and the mammoth epistemic changes that those people would occasion for his life and his music.

With his tuition covered by the G.I. Bill, and his father providing him a place to stay, Mitchell enrolled in Woodrow Wilson Junior College in 1961. Shortly after matriculation, Mitchell found kinship with saxophonist Joseph Jarman, three years his senior and a musician already armed with a distinct, forward-thinking approach and a penchant for experimentation. The two first met in music theory classes taught by Dr. Richard Wang. A formative teacher for both, Wang possessed practical experience as a jazz musician and openness to integrating the musics of the Second Viennese School of Arnold Schoenberg and the innovations of Charlie Parker and John Coltrane into his more compulsory lessons on theory, harmony, and counterpoint.

Wang’s conviction that his students gain practical performance experience was a pointed and indispensable aspect of his pedagogy. To that end, Wang had his Wilson students—who, in addition to Mitchell and Jarman, included soon-to-be-AACM colleagues and collaborators Malachi Favors, Anthony Braxton, and Ari Brown—perform with venerable Chicago musicians like Eddie Harris, Jack DeJohnette, Steve McCall, and Andrew Hill each Friday.

But Mitchell and Jarman were far from satiated. Despite the college’s doors remaining locked until Mondays, the two continued rehearsing their music on weekends, which started as a way to perform Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers repertoire, but soon turned to more rigorous explorations of the “weird records” of Coleman, Eric Dolphy, and John Coltrane. Mitchell credits Jarman as a “very good influence on me” and one who pushed the younger saxophonist towards further reaches of exploration and freer forms.

But Mitchell’s true turnabout came when drummer DeJohnette brought him to a rehearsal of Muhal Richard Abrams and his Experimental Band. Mitchell swiftly became ensconced in Abrams’ universe: one which was predicated on a rigorous and steadfast commitment to *originality* of compositional ideas, exploration of improvisatory possibilities, and discussions of extra-musical concerns like philosophy, painting, and astrology. Mitchell remembers: “Muhal kind of took me in. I’d go to school, and I’d go straight from school to Muhal’s, when he was living in that little place off of Cottage Grove, down in the basement. I remember he had painted everything that velvet purple color. Sometimes I’d be down at Muhal’s at ten, eleven, twelve at night playing or working on music.”

Taken as he was by his new mentor, Mitchell recruited his Wilson College classmates Jarman and Henry Threadgill to join him in these sessions. Abrams’ generosity was boundless, and he envisioned his Experimental Band as a site for open exchange of creativity; a place for young musicians to compose and perform their



own work; and a forum for his own compositions to be played by his mentees. This composition-forward dictum had an immense impact on young Mitchell, who remembers that “[Abrams] always encouraged people to write, write, write. He was showing us all of these compositional methods. He always had a deep appreciation for all kinds of music and studied all kinds of music. He had a lot to draw on and passed it on freely to the people that wanted to learn that.”

Abrams’ premise of compositional and improvisational originality were followed faithfully by his pupils, as is evident when investigating both the early (and later) work of soon-to-be luminaries Mitchell, Jarman, Braxton, Threadgill and others. Their approaches to composition and improvisation remain indelible and distinct to this day.

Although the definitive history and ideological treatment of this is given in George Lewis’ *A Power Stronger Than Itself*—and much of it extends beyond the aims of this essay—it is necessary to mention that the spirit motivating the Experimental Band meetings, in conjunction with myriad forces corroding opportunities for musicians in Chicago, gave birth to the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). The AACM was premised on providing a supportive infrastructure for black musicians to perform (strictly) original composition; for maintaining a workshop “for the expressed purpose of bringing talented musicians together;” to foster equitable working conditions between musicians and record labels; to “stimulate spiritual growth in creative artists through recitals, concerts etc.,” and to provide “free training” to interested youth musicians.

With Abrams’ encouragement, Mitchell began rehearsing his new group, The Roscoe Mitchell Quartet, with bassist Favors, trumpeter Fred Berry, and drummer Alvin Fielder. Fielder recalls at the time that the compositions Mitchell brought in were “very much like Ornette’s music,” but that this quartet also afforded him his first opportunity to practice free improvisation. Evidence of this otherwise undocumented quartet (and Mitchell’s explicit debt to Ornette Coleman) is appreciable from Mitchell’s first recording session—made in 1964 but not released until 2011 under the title *Before There Was Sound* (Delmark)—which features boisterous, jagged, swinging pieces like “Mr. Freddy” and “Carefree” alongside the more meditative, elastic “Green” and “Outer Space,” all of which bear the shadow of several early Coleman compositions. Despite that appreciable spiritual antecedent, Mitchell’s alto saxophone playing by this time is fully *sui generis* and demonstrably unique; laden with spiky, wide-interval phrases, rendered complete with his characteristic tonal acerbity.

Mitchell maintained this quartet until their final concert in August of 1965 and substituted various other AACM musicians in the group after Berry decamped for graduate studies at Stanford. It was not until meeting Lester Bowie, an already decorated Rhythm and Blues trumpet player from St. Louis, that Mitchell relayed to Favors that he had found a worthy replacement. Favors and others were initially incredulous about Bowie’s commitment to their fledgling group, given his commercial success with his wife Fontella Bass, but to Bowie, meeting these Chicago musicians was incredibly fortuitous: “That was what I had been looking for: an opportunity to really deal into the music.” Concurrently, Favors introduced the “little instruments”—collections of idiosyncratic tiny percussion instruments—to what was then known as the Roscoe Mitchell Art Ensemble.

The defining constituent elements of their new music now in place, Mitchell and his sextet recorded the first commercially available AACM album, *Sound* (Delmark, 1966). Chuck Nessa, a young, obsessive music fan and employee at the storied Jazz Record Mart, pleaded with his boss, Robert Koester (proprietor of both the Record Mart and Delmark Records) to sign Mitchell, Jarman, and Abrams to contracts with Delmark. Joining Mitchell on *Sound* were Bowie, Favors, and Fielder, as well as Maurice McIntyre (tenor saxophone, later known as Kalaparusha), and Lester Lashley (trombone), all of whom supplemented their principals with the aforementioned “little instruments”—harmonicas, small percussion, kazoos, and more.

*Sound* begins with the dedicatory Mitchell composition “Ornette,” but when compared to his recording date from the year before, its title is almost incongruous. In the intervening year, Mitchell had clearly cemented his own idiosyncratic formal approach and reduced the Ornette-inspired feeling that pervaded the previous effort. In that sense, the eponymous nod suggests something of a maturation for Mitchell, a reflection of the spiritual debt that he owed to Coleman and his innovations yet carrying with it the tacit recognition that to honor his predecessor meant to forge *his own music*, allowing the similarities to be viewed almost like a palimpsest. The album’s timbral, spatial, and formal severity increase as it progresses, with dramatic use of unaccompanied solo passages; previously unheard and (still) shocking textures, laden with redoubtable technique and self-assurance; and, most importantly, an emphasis on improvisational collectivity.

The reception of *Sound* was laudatory and immediate, with *DownBeat* granting it the full five stars and myriad other rave reviews in the jazz press. Chicago critic John Litweiler compared Mitchell to his hero by saying that he possessed, “an Ornette Coleman—

like imagination,” and noted his “attention to the use of sound as such.” By 1967, Mitchell’s star was firmly on the rise, and he found himself ranked alongside already-established talents like Lee Konitz, and Marion Brown in the *DownBeat* Critics’ Poll “Talent Deserving Wider Recognition” category.

With its group trajectory set in motion—and with the new addition of accomplished drummer Philip Wilson, who was soon to depart for the Paul Butterfield Blues Band—the Roscoe Mitchell Art Ensemble recorded several additional albums in 1967 and 1968 which took the latent aspects of *Sound* and compounded them with further studies in humor, theatricality, and extensive formal investigation. *Old/Quartet*, recorded in May 1967 (although not released until 1975 by Nessa) features two long-form compositions, “Old” and “Trio,” which traverse sputtering thematic recitations, wide dynamic undulations, and labyrinthine motivic movements, all within a dramatic and unpredictable framework. The enigmatic unfolding of these Mitchell compositions are contrasted with a more groove-oriented, propulsive piece from the same session, Bowie’s “Tatas-Matoes,” which is presented as a rehearsal tape—warts, laughter, and all.

*Congliptious*, recorded in February and March of 1968 (and released in the same year by Nessa) features two Mitchell compositions: “Tkhke,”—a solo alto statement, that begins with a gentle melodic teasing of the theme which is eventually swallowed by entropic overblowing and keenly-implemented multiphonics—and the mammoth, episodic “Congliptious/Old.” This near-twenty-minute rendition of the piece recorded the year before, proceeds with a more nuanced employment of alternate sound sources, vocalizations, cathartic eruptions, and a playful irreverence towards the material, with the horns contorting the theme with quasi-microtonality and bending. In addition to Mitchell’s compositions are Favors’ iconic solo rendering of his “Tutankhamen” and Bowie’s “Jazz Death,” a hysterical, parodic piece in which Bowie impersonates a “Dave Flexenbergstein” from “Jism Magazine” who interrogates Bowie himself with the wry question, “Is Jazz, as we know it, dead?,” while the trumpeter’s answer comes in the form of an extended solo, ending with him saying, “Well, I guess that all depends on what you know,” and tapering off with a demonic laughter, an indication of the limits of the jazz press and the imminent need for a critical revaluation of the music in light of what these Chicagoans were promulgating.

*Congliptious*, as a whole, shows the Art Ensemble with all of their definable elements firmly in place—a proper foreshadowing of much of their, and particularly Mitchell’s, music to be made in the decades to come. Will Smith, writing for *Jazz & Pop* (August

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1969 issue) astutely observed that *Congliptious* is “a wriggling mass of glad happenings—the lightning sound of mad sanity contained.”

### III.

In Europe, there was already buzz surrounding the innovations of the new music from Chicago, and the Parisian drummer, Claude Delcloo, in correspondence with Muhal Richard Abrams, hinted that there would be money for recordings and work—were the musicians to travel to Europe—with the Actuel-BYG label, which was already active in recording albums by New York luminaries Archie Shepp and Sunny Murray amongst others. AACM founding member Steve McCall had already relocated with his family, first to Amsterdam and then to Paris, in no small part thanks to Delcloo’s encouragement. Indeed, Delcloo had larger quixotic aspirations for a “global federation of free musics,” which would tie in the AACM musicians with forward-thinking progenitors from Paris, Berne, Brussels, New York, Rome, and Philadelphia.

Given this ascendent international attention, the musicians of the AACM were eager to find further opportunities to expand their audience and increase the impact of their music. Lester Bowie most pointedly viewed it as a matter of “survival” that the music reach new ears, saying that the “only way for us to survive was to develop a world audience.” A trans-Atlantic relocation would also alleviate some of their financial hardships, with Mitchell working at the Victor Comptometer Factory to support himself and Jarman “struggling to survive” in Chicago solely on music.

There were several crucial changes in conjunction with their move that pointed toward absolute collectivity for the Art Ensemble, the first being the change of their name from The Roscoe Mitchell Art Ensemble to The Art Ensemble (the “of Chicago” would be appended upon their arrival in France) to emphasize a lack of distinct leader and figurehead. Just as significant, if not more, was that the group’s finances would pivot to a collective model, with Bowie fronting the seed money to fund their trip across the Atlantic by selling his Bentley, all of his furniture, even taking out a newspaper ad with the humorous line “Musician Sells Out.”

The newly christened band performed their farewell concert on May 24, 1969, at the University of Chicago’s Blue Gargoyle. This show was also their first with the addition of Joseph Jarman as full-fledged member. At the performance, Bowie boldly pronounced that the “AACM was becoming a world-wide institution” as a way to temper whatever sadness there was in the audience about the departure of this now-beloved group.

Four days hence, Mitchell, Bowie, Jarman, Favors, and Bowie’s wife, Fontella Bass, boarded the S.S. *United States* for France.



When they arrived in Le Havre, Delcloo and his BYG Records colleague, photographer Jacques Bisceglia, were there waiting, and they drove the 200 kilometers to reach Paris, carting with them “an arsenal of nonviolent weapons and several hundred musical instruments that weighed over two tons.”

To this day there remains some debate—and perhaps resentment—around who in the AACM had the initial idea for relocation to Paris, with the Anthony Braxton, Leo Smith, Leroy Jenkins trio still claiming that it was *their* idea to decamp. Bowie, by then the AACM president, dissuaded them from leaving their native city under the guise of “black power” and “solidarity,” only to turn around and convince his Art Ensemble colleagues to prepare to move to France. A conclusive answer to this, of course, will likely never be settled upon. Irrespective of whoever conceived of the idea, the move to Europe was something of a foregone conclusion for all, and the AACM took hold in Paris, *en masse*.

The Art Ensemble arrived in France at a time when it was ripe with artistic activity, talent, and musical innovation. The Parisians were largely receptive to the work of the Art Ensemble, which was markedly distinct from the methods employed by the more New York-inspired music then principally in favor. Immediately upon arrival—particularly in the club the *Chat-qui-Pêche*—Mitchell and Jarman were distinctly struck by the ease of access to legendary figures, like Hank Mobley, Johnny Griffin, Dexter Gordon, and Philly Joe Jones, who would have otherwise eluded them. Paris was also a site for interchange with more contemporary players from outside of Chicago, like Coleman, Ed Blackwell, Archie Shepp, and Grachan Moncur, the latter two of whom Mitchell would record with for BYG.

Only ten days after arriving in the city, The Art Ensemble had their first European performance as a headlining act at the Théâtre du Lucernaire. Backed by several laudatory reviews by Daniel Caux, the *Jazz Hot* critic, the Art Ensemble was already a known entity in the city, and Caux pointedly noted the Art Ensemble’s “impeccable formal precision” and their change-on-a-dime antics which encapsulated humor, profundity, and their deft use of space. In short, the Art Ensemble was now nothing short of an “immediate sensation.”

After several itinerant housing situations—including a functioning mental hospital where a psychiatric doctor and friend of Delcloo’s was practicing—the Art Ensemble famously took residence in a large, six-bedroom house in Saint-Leu-la-Forêt, which had ample room to store all of their instruments and rehearse in an unfettered environment. They pushed their collective model of

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living by splitting all of their earnings in an equal way and putting the money back into the group, which allowed for their massive swell of musical proliferation.

Mitchell, to wit: “I saw Johnny Griffin, who to me is one of the giants of the music. He’s over there, and I don’t know if he even had his own band . . . Whereas the Art Ensemble went over there as a unit. When we had a gig, we sat down and figured out what we could get paid out of this and what we needed to do. We went over there as a strong unit. We had our own house. We had several trucks . . . that’s what comes of staying together. I don’t know why people don’t really learn that. I think that people think that ‘Oh, I’m the chosen one’ . . . It’s not even about that. That’s one of the best things I got out of the AACM.”

On June 23, 1969, the Art Ensemble recorded *A Jackson in Your House* for BYG, their first of what would be fifteen albums recorded in the next two years. In the three days following, the group would also record *Tutankhamen* and *The Spiritual* (June 26, 1969), both for the Freedom label. *A Jackson in Your House*—which is laden with unhinged intermedia theatricality, almost bordering on the vaudevillian, amidst a panoptic presentation of stylistic devices and biting political commentary and satire—is a seminal Art Ensemble record in substance and execution, and is something of an early masterpiece. That it was one of three records recorded in a single week, with the others being stylistically divergent and complete statements in their own right, makes the accomplishment all the more staggering.

The pieces on these albums were all in the Art Ensemble’s live repertoire at this time, providing insight into the nature of what these early, revelatory Paris performances must have been like—a truly unique, *nonpareil* ensemble in full force. In the remaining months of 1969, the Art Ensemble would go on to record four more, now-canonical, albums: *People In Sorrow* (Nessa, July 7, 1969), *Message to Our Folks* (BYG, August 12, 1969), *Reese and the Smooth Ones* (BYG, August 12, 1969) and *Eda Wobu* (JMY, October 5, 1969).

Yet, despite the abundant fruits of their European stay, the exiled Chicagoans still were a quartet in need of a drummer. Although they offered the chair to Thurman Barker and Robert Crowder in Chicago,<sup>5</sup> the prospect of a move to Europe was too daunting for both, and they passed on the opportunity. It was at the 1969 Baden-Baden Free Jazz Meeting in West Germany that they were to meet their fifth member, Don Moye, a young drummer then playing with saxophonist Steve Lacy in Paris who had seen Mitchell and Jarman perform in Detroit years earlier, and who “put [his] bid in like everybody else.”

That bid was ultimately successful, and they continued their prolific streak of recorded work—as a quintet—for the duration of their stay in France, with *Chi-Congo* (Decca, May 1970), *Les Stances a Sophie* (a soundtrack for a film with the same name, recorded July 22, 1970), *Live in Paris* (BYG, August 13, 1970), *Art Ensemble of Chicago with Fontella Bass* (Prestige/America, August 1970), and *Phase One* (Prestige/America, February 1971).

From the outset, the journey that the Art Ensemble took to Paris was never intended to be a permanent relocation—unlike expat colleagues like Bobby Few and Mal Waldron—and the Art Ensemble felt beckoned back to the United States. With fifteen acclaimed albums under their belts, and a reputation firmly established, their two years overseas seem like an unequivocal success. On April 11, 1971, the quintet boarded the S.S. *Raffaello* for New York.

#### IV.

Upon returning to America, Bowie decided to bypass Chicago to return to his native St. Louis. He purchased a house in the University City neighborhood and reified connections made with the Black Artists Group (BAG), a collective of St. Louis musicians modeled on the AACM. Mitchell and Moye followed Bowie and took up residence in the BAG Building in St. Louis, using this time to practice, rehearse with the BAG musicians, and counsel their St. Louis colleagues to travel to Paris.

Mitchell's stay in St. Louis, though, was short-lived. His friend, the composer David Wessel, had taken a job in the music faculty at Michigan State University in East Lansing, and encouraged Mitchell to relocate to the area. Mitchell says that this move “came at a period when I wanted to get out of the cities and move to the country. I had waited until the Art Ensemble had started to work, and it dawned on me that I could live wherever I wanted to live. But then going and actually moving to the country was terrifying. I got there and I looked in the mirror and I didn't really see that much.” Although initially daunting, this move to Bath, Michigan—in the Northern East Lansing adjacencies—would prove decisive in Mitchell's trajectory as both an artist and an organizer.

Shortly after moving to Bath, Mitchell met a group of Wessel's students from Michigan State. Inspired by their musicianship and dedication, Mitchell chartered the Creative Arts Collective, an organization founded on principles that echoed those of the AACM. Mitchell explains: “What I did was, I took the model of the AACM to construct it—that is, using the basic, fundamental principles that established the AACM to establish a concert series, and present concerts.”<sup>6</sup>

Mitchell continues: “Working with the CAC has not been difficult for me because we started working together in 1973. And when I first met these guys they were in college. And we decided that East Lansing was the place that we were going to develop into sort of a musical center, you know—similar to the way we had done it with the AACM in Chicago.” “What we wanted to do was establish a place where we could have the music, concerts of our own, and then have an exchange program going on. We started off with AACM members in Chicago because they were close and easier to bring up and then we expanded and to bring in people from wherever they were—New York or whatever like that.”<sup>7</sup>

The administration at Michigan State was so receptive to this fledgling organization that they granted Mitchell and the CAC access to a theater-in-the-round on campus—and even the Abrams Planetarium—for use as their concert venues. It was through these efforts that Mitchell became associated with several musicians who he went on to have extensive musical relationships with: guitarist Spencer Barefield (who has directed the CAC for decades), drummer/percussionist Tanni Tabbal, and bassist Jaribu Shahid.

Beyond his efforts as an organizer, the freedom to play at any hour—unfettered by concerns of disturbing neighbors or conversely, of being disturbed and distracted by the goings-on in a city—that his new rural environment afforded Mitchell allowed him to “slow [myself] down and do a lot of composing.” In these early Bath days, Mitchell penned what is likely his most notable composition, one which he continues to reconfigure, reevaluate, and recontextualize to this day: “Nonaah.”

“Nonaah,” composed in 1972, was originally conceived of as a way to exploit the multiple registers of the solo alto saxophone, and in-so-doing manifest a polyphony stemming from the clarity of the articulations of those distinct registers. In the liner notes to *Nonaah* (Nessa, 1977), Mitchell says, “‘Nonaah’ is a fictional character that I’ve come up with . . . The thing about ‘Nonaah’ is that once you put yourself in that atmosphere you can ride on forever. The world has the properties of very large skips, and it has notes that have accidental qualities that are kept. The rhythmic values are those of quarters, eights and triplets; in the slow parts all can be extended, the regular triplet to quarter-note or half-note triplets as in the quartet version. I rehearse it in a very strict tempo and very loose, so everyone knows where he is, and I can take the privilege of accelerating certain points. When I do it solo, I do it many different ways.”<sup>8</sup>

Despite its origins as a solo piece, the first recorded version of “Nonaah” is a sextet arrangement on a studio recording by the Art Ensemble, *Fanfare for the Warriors* (Atlantic, 1974), which fea-

tures the addition of Muhal Richard Abrams on piano. Recorded at Paragon Studios in Chicago in September 1973, the AEC delivers a triumphant and raucous recitation of the short piece, which then blossoms into an Abrams improvisation that deviates significantly from the composition's motivic specificity. Mitchell's improvised entrance towards the end of the piece refocuses its intervallic intention, stretching, diluting, elasticizing its motives, and acts as a coda, one picked up on by Jarman, Bowie, and Moye to deliver a rather abrupt and unceremonious conclusion to the piece. In many ways, this is a fitting exposition for "Nonaah," as its tendrils would quickly outgrow its originally intended solo context and function as a modular vehicle for Mitchell's growing interests.

Around this same time—and likely influenced by the aforementioned isolation of his rural home in Bath—Mitchell began working more intensely on solo material and performed solo concerts extensively. Several of these performances were collected on his *The Roscoe Mitchell Solo Saxophone Concerts* album (Sackville, 1974), the cover of which displays Mitchell outside of his home in Bath, surrounded by myriad saxophones, flutes, recorders, and his dog, Io. Bookending the double LP are the first two solo renditions of "Nonaah" available for public consumption—the first recorded on November 2, 1973, in Montreal, Quebec and the second at the Pori International Jazz Festival in Finland on July 12, 1974. Both versions are extremely taut (under two minutes each) and intensely focused on the angular, relentlessly articulated written material. The solo in Finland begins with an exuberant audience collectively pounding and cheering, and their hosannas are heard throughout, thrilled by the radicality of Mitchell's composition.

But the most canonical version of the piece was performed in front of an audience oppositely disposed, at least initially. On August 26, 1976, the Art Ensemble opened the Willisau Jazz Festival and had a warm reception; indeed in a festival-audience poll, the AEC was voted "group of the year."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, it was their AACM colleague Anthony Braxton—by then a bonafide celebrity in European jazz circles—who was the unequivocal favorite of the attendees and one who many in attendance had "traveled hundreds of kilometers" to hear perform solo. Given a break in their tour schedule, the Art Ensemble decided to stay and hear Braxton's solo performance on the 28th for themselves. Travel snafus impeded Braxton's arrival to Willisau, and as the concert start-time neared, it was abundantly clear that he would not be arriving.

Consequently, the festival organizer, and noted Swiss graphic designer, Niklaus Troxler asked Mitchell if he would perform in Braxton's stead. Mitchell rushed back to his hotel to retrieve his

alto and had "an hour to warm up." As Terry Martin notes, the concert immediately "begins with a confrontation." The audience is audibly incensed that their "idol" had been deposed; that Mitchell, something of a cherished celebrity in his own right, would have the gall to replace Braxton was *ipso facto* offensive to them. Years later, Mitchell claims that he "understood their disappointment—I wanted to see Anthony myself!"<sup>10</sup>

But in the moment, this ostentatious audience derision only emboldened Mitchell further: "I went out there and got this tension thing. It was a battle. I had to make the noise and whatever was going on with the audience part of the piece. The music couldn't move till they respected me, until they realized that I wasn't going anywhere and if someone was going it would have had to be them. It was very interesting, and it helped create the environment the piece was to take place in."

His vehicle to garner their respect was one line from his recently arranged four alto saxophone version of "Nonaah"; a nine note phrase, relentlessly repeated and varied with peerlessly persistent focus and intensity. By around five minutes of the phrase's repetition—then laden with harsh timbral inflection—the audience's hostility had morphed into jubilation; cheering and spurring Mitchell's further exploration. In Mitchell's words, he had "cleared the air" and was able to continue on with the concert unimpeded by their jeers.<sup>11</sup> After his staunch "Nonaah," Mitchell had the audience in the palm of his hand; they had acceded to him "on his terms, not theirs." Mitchell claims to have learned a "big lesson from that . . . hecklers aren't going to scream me down if I've got a saxophone and all they have is their voice."

Shortly upon returning to the States from this tour, Mitchell was in talks with Chuck Nessa about releasing an album and sent him the Willisau tapes. Nessa said the music "overwhelmed" him, and he consequently decided to release the concert in full, along with additional solo and ensemble material, with the title *Nonaah* (Nessa, 1977). The LP concludes with the four-alto saxophone arrangement of "Nonaah," which features Mitchell's alto alongside Jarman, Henry Threadgill, and (regrettably forgotten early AACM stalwart) Wallace McMillan, who all fully accept the challenge of the piece: its dynamic undulations within its elegant formal structure and the rigor required to convincingly accomplish the insistent repetition of its wide interval phrases.

In the subsequent forty-five years, "Nonaah" has been a consistent reference point for Mitchell and a piece that he's gone on to rework in many additional contexts—for cello quartet; trio of bassoon, flute, and piano; for the Sound Ensemble; and most recently for the Norwegian Naval Forces Band in Bergen, Norway. In a re-



cent interview, Mitchell describes the piece as “my own system, a particular set of mathematics” and one that is endlessly generative.<sup>12</sup>

Mitchell’s next significant solo album, which was released the following year, *L-R-G / The Maze / S II Examples* (Nessa, 1978), featured three distinct modes of Mitchell’s ever-increasing compositional acumen. The first, “L-R-G,” takes its name from the players’ initials (Leo Smith, Roscoe Mitchell, and George Lewis). The piece was written for their idiosyncratic vocabularies—with Smith on high brass, Lewis on low brass, and Mitchell on various woodwinds—collaged to make an organized whole which focused on textural and dynamic affinities between the musicians. “The Maze” was likely Mitchell’s most ambitious piece at the time, and featured the AACM supergroup of Mitchell, Jarman, Braxton, Threadgill, Moye, Favors, Barker, and Douglas Ewart, all of whom were tasked with exclusive performing on various percussion instruments. Lewis took a global view of “The Maze” and remarked that Mitchell’s composition “welcome[s] the blending of personal narrative with complex notated forms. The multiplicity of voices in Mitchell’s multi-instrumentalist compositional palette encourages the timbral diversity of an ensemble to exceed the sum of its instrumental parts, while encouraging individuality to coexist with the collective.”<sup>13</sup> The concluding piece, “S II Examples,” is an exploration of the native multiphonics on a curved soprano saxophone. It was originally thought of as a trio with Jarman and Braxton, whose straight sopranos were incapable of playing the piece as-so-conceived.<sup>14</sup>

In the early 1980s, Mitchell began working with two groups that would both contribute the bulk of his output outside of the Art Ensemble for the ensuing decade plus: the Sound Ensemble (with CAC members, guitarist Barefield, trumpeter Hugh Ragin, bassist Shahid, and drummer Tabal) and the Space Ensemble (with vocalist Tom Buckner and fellow woodwind virtuoso Gerald Oshita). Mitchell debuted the Sound Ensemble—likely a nod to the name of his debut from 1966—with the album *Snurdy McGurdy and Her Dancin’ Shoes* (Nessa, 1981), and the music was largely unprecedented in Mitchell’s oeuvre at that time: a still-jarring mixture of deeply funk-inflected, ear-friendly compositions nestled alongside extended textural pieces and a rendition of the Sousa-inspired Braxton march “40 Q.” The Sound Ensemble recorded several more albums in short succession, *3x4 Eye* (recorded February 18 and 19, 1981 in Milan), *More Cutouts* (recorded February 20, 1981, in Firenze, sans Shahid), and *Roscoe Mitchell and The Sound and Space Ensembles* (recorded June 2 and 3, 1983 in Milan), which combined both groups.

Although he met them close to a decade earlier—in California, during a trip west with Bowie and Wilson—Mitchell only properly began collaborating with Buckner and Oshita in the summer of 1979 while he was the program director of the Woodstock Creative Music Studios. Mitchell invited both to join him in Woodstock, with Oshita even teaching a course on “New Concepts in Composition.” In the summer of 1981, the trio recorded their first album, *New Music For Woodwinds And Voice* (Wakefield Pressing), not yet adopting the Space moniker. They went on to record their second and final full-length LP, *An Interesting Breakfast Conversation* (1750 Arch Records, 1984) as Space, and the album is sourced from studio sessions and live recordings made at New York’s Public Theater. Oshita and Buckner also contributed to Mitchell’s *Four Compositions* (Lovely Music, 1987) with their appearance on “Prelude,” which supplemented Space’s trio with a triple contrabass of Brian Smith.<sup>15</sup>

This collaboration is significant inasmuch as it clearly reset a direction in Mitchell’s collaborative disposition. And its heightened use of dynamics and more chamber-oriented approach complemented the more jazz and groove influenced aspects of the Sound Ensemble. Mitchell’s association with Buckner would also align him with New York chamber groups like the SEM Ensemble (and their director Petr Kotik), who would go on to be ardent supporters of Mitchell’s chamber and symphonic works in the subsequent decades, notably documented on albums such as *Not Yet (Six Compositions)* (Mutable Music, 2013).

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Mitchell convened a modular group under the moniker of The Note Factory, which has included collaborators like Craig Taborn, Matthew Shipp, William Parker, and Gerald Cleaver alongside musicians he had worked with for decades like Lewis, Tabal, Ragin, and Barefield. The Note Factory has released several albums with different conceptions throughout its lifespan: *This Dance Is For Steve McCall* (Black Saint, 1993), *Nine to Get Ready* (ECM, 1999), *Song for My Sister* (Pi Recordings, 2002), and *Far Side* (ECM, 2010).

Mitchell continues to focus on solo performance and the music being presented in that context bears little sonic resemblance to the aforementioned reputation-cementing early albums. Twenty-first century solo recordings like *Solo [3]* (Mutable Music, 2003) and *Sustain and Run* (Selo SESC SP, 2016), with their notable use of circular breathing, overblowing, and timbral severity, are characteristic marks of Mitchell’s later playing, which only has grown in its intensity.

Beginning in the 1990s, Mitchell began teaching at the university level. He started as a professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison—his adopted hometown—where he taught a large survey course to “over 500 students,” and an improvised music class. He was then a professor at California Institute for the Arts in Valencia, California for several years before being given his longest appointment at Mills College in Oakland, California, where he served as the Darius Milhaud Chair of Composition from 2007 until his retirement in 2018. At Mills he joined a prestigious faculty of fellow improvisers and an institution with a robust legacy of experimentation and openness to creativity. Mitchell’s tutelage attracted legions of students to the school to study under him specifically, and his rigorous approach to musical pedagogy has influenced several generations of improvisers.

Reflecting on his retirement, Mitchell said: “I did have one notion while I was at Mills—when the students would show me their portfolios, and I would see how much work they were getting done, you know, and it dawned on me there that perhaps I should be a student and then that way I could get some work done. But in 2018 that happened. And I’ve been having that opportunity to be a student since then and have been totally enjoying it.” This is the situation that Mitchell finds himself in today—as a tireless student of music, with a bottomless desire for discovery and growth, even in his eighty-first year.

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# SO, IT WAS A GREAT DAY, ACTUALLY

Roscoe Mitchell in conversation with  
Tomeka Reid and David Brown

TR How are you?

RM I'm great.

DB Sorry we never did manage to pull it off before.

RM Yeah, it's fine. I've been plenty busy, man. I'm painting like crazy. I'm surprised at my own self.

TR Would you say that you're painting more these days than composing?

RM I would say yes to that question. I get up with the sunrise in my sunroom, and I get stuck out there with the colors and ideas about the ways to develop the paintings and so on. I mean, sometimes when I go to bed at night—if I do something I'm not quite sure about—it bothers me and wakes me up. And then I have to solve the problem. I'm glad to have returned to this kind of activity at this point in my life.

DB Is there something that sparked the return to painting?

RM Well, a long time ago, I remember spending a lot of time just sitting in front of the painting and trying to figure out what I was going to do next. And that was enjoyment for me. But then, after a certain time, my life was changing, and I was trying to figure out if I needed to start taking care of other things. So, I just put that energy into composition. That kind of paid off, because [they] use the same part of the brain, and they both inform each other. And what I learned from that was development. The way that I develop my music, I do the same thing with the paintings. If I learn something new about composition [in a painting], I may carry that over to the next piece that I'm writing.

DB So, there are times where you do something in the painting, and that sparks some ideas relative to composition and vice versa.

RM Yeah. Like, a long time ago, I did some pieces that had color on them—musical pieces and so on—and I may go back and pick up some of that [for a painting]. I know you've looked at some of Anthony [Braxton]'s work. It's like his compositions almost jump off the page with all the dimensions and things and colors that he has.

I say if you got a good idea, then you can use that in a variety of ways. One clear example of that would be Handel. He wrote several pieces, and he wasn't afraid to use anything that was successful. He changed the movements just a little bit, or it's the same piece with some changes in another key and so on, and all of these small changes change the piece. And he invented it, so he got the right to use it.

TR Do you have any favorite painters that are inspiring you today?

RM I don't go out that much, but when Muhal [Richard Abrams]

was alive, we used to always go to different exhibitions. I was really impressed by Ivan Albright,<sup>1</sup> this painting that he did of this door where he spent ten years doing it.<sup>2</sup> I went there with Muhal, and he was saying, “Look at the way he paints these people’s skin and stuff. He paints right past the people.” But that’s the concept of layering all of these different paints and so on.

TR Can you maybe describe a typical day?

RM Well, it’s relative to what I got going on. Right now I know I got this exhibition, and I want to have some killer paintings. So, I put a little more time into that. But a typical day with me is up at sunrise. Sometimes I beat the sun up because, out in the sunroom, it’s so beautiful when it comes up. That’s kind of like a ritual for me. I’m out there. It’s almost daylight. And, all of a sudden, the sun comes up, and I’m out there painting already.

TR And can you then talk about when you’re about to go on tour? What is the preparation for you?

RM Well, my policy is to be packed up long before I’m going anywhere, because if I don’t do that, I may forget some things. Like this last tour, I got there and found out I didn’t have the neck for my soprano, so I didn’t get a chance to play it the whole tour. I might take the stuff out of my bag when I come home, and then, once it’s washed, I just put it back there, so all I need to do when it’s time for me to go anywhere is just pick up my bag and go.

TR You just stay ready.

RM Yeah, but I’m starting to appreciate gigs in the States and stuff, too, because I can bring the instruments that I want to bring along. When I came back from Europe, we had bought a couple of vans over there, and I had an English Ford Transit with the double wheels on it and so on. And back then, I could put everything I owned in my van, including my dog. But now that’s all out the window. I mean, I have so much stuff, so I keep concentrating on being prepared for what’s coming up.

TR And I guess that translates into the music, too.

RM Yeah, that does. I’m going back through all my rock and roll tunes and stuff. “I’m the Laundry Man,” “Daddy Rolling Stone.” You know that piece? [*singing*]

*Girl, you think you had loving girl,  
do doo da doo doo*

*You think you had fun to do?*

*Girl, you ain’t had nothing until the daddy comes*

*They call me Daddy*

All those pieces. [*all laugh*] That’s good stuff in there!

TR And you’ve always had a dog, huh?

RM Yeah, I’m more or less a dog person. I’ve had cats, but cats are different. I learn a lot from dogs. They’re always happy with

whatever’s going on. If it’s raining, they don’t care. If it’s snowing or whatever. They find joy in whatever’s going on.

DB Which did you start pursuing first, music or painting? Or were they simultaneous?

RM Well, painting was kind of first on my agenda, because my uncle, Arthur Charles Commodore Carter, was an artist, and he was working with crayon and pen and ink. He would put on the crayon and then another color on top of it. Then he would use his protractor to scrape it to mix the paints. He did this book of my sisters and myself and some of our friends, and we were all of these people from outer space. When he passed those books got somehow gone. I keep thinking about them, but I know that’s long gone.

But that was the first influence on me. It wasn’t until later on that one of my older brothers, Norman, came to live with us in Milwaukee, and he would sit me down and have me listen to all these records and so on. And then, when I was starting in high school in Milwaukee, I decided to start an instrument. I started on the clarinet, because most people back then would say if you want to play the saxophone, you need to learn how to play the clarinet first.

TR I know you incorporated some percussion into your set up, but did you ever think about [playing] strings at all?

RM I did in college. It was Wilson Junior College. You were supposed to take a string instrument, so I took cello. I also have this beautiful flute that Rafael Garrett made for me. It’s a bamboo flute. You can hear it on this piece called “Stomp and the Fire East Blues.” [*Snurdy McGurdy and Her Dancin’ Shoes*, 1980, Nessa]

And the smaller instruments, Malachi probably introduced them first to the Art Ensemble, so I started up with those on the recording *Sound* and that kind of thing. And then, I just kept evolving with it.

TR Can we just go back a few years to the ensemble that you put together for the *We Are On The Edge* recording? [Pi Recordings, 2019] What led to you thinking of larger groups?

RM Well, it was an attempt to put together an orchestra to do larger pieces. When I was out at Mills College, I put together a thirty-six-piece chamber orchestra. And Greg Howe [of Wide Hive Records] came along with big ideas and so on. I’d always thought about what’s involved in getting an orchestral piece recorded, and it came to me that what’s involved is to get your own chamber orchestra! [*laughs*]

I got people to transcribe the *Conversations* records<sup>3</sup> that I did, and I turned them into orchestral pieces. The first concert of those was in Reykjavik. I premiered five short pieces there. Ilan Volkov, do you know him? The conductor. He’s like poetry in motion. He had asked me to improvise on the piece *Rub*. I told him

I didn't want to, because it's meant to be a standalone piece. But then I thought, "Wait a minute, you're supposed to be an improviser. How many opportunities are you going to have to try out these things?" So, I tried it out—and it didn't dawn on me at once—but what I did was create another version of that piece where I could get somebody to transcribe my improvisation. So, the thing is always growing. That's what fascinated me about it, because it gave me an opportunity to study what I normally do with other people live. And I can keep developing it. It's always changing, even if the same musician is improvising on it because there's going to be a different version.

With me, it's exciting just to get up and learn something. I've got all the books, but I can't do everything at once. I don't consider myself to be the fastest learner, but I'm going to get to all of that. Like I said, I try to keep up with what's going on at the moment.

DB When I had the opportunity to hear your quintet this summer, it was striking that there was a kind of traditional trio of saxophone, bass, and drums. But then the drums were doubled up with a kind of different percussion set. And one could argue that maybe the bass was doubled up with the addition of cello.

RM That comes from traditional music writing. I mean, a lot of times the basses are doubled with the cello like that.

DB But in terms of what you do to put yourself into different challenges, and the instrumentation, and how you interact with them or what that sets up musically . . .

RM Well, absolutely. A lot of times, I may be hearing one note on one instrument and the next note that I'm hearing is a bell or something like that. I try to experiment with all kinds of different orchestrations and be organic about it in a way.

Muhal would always encourage everybody to write for his band. And if you didn't like what you wrote, he encouraged you to take it home and keep working with it until you liked what you were doing. That was a great lesson for me, because if you don't do that, then every time you listen to that piece, what you didn't like is still going to be there. It's been a good model for the rest of my life. Like I said earlier, the painting woke me up because I wasn't happy with some work that I did, and I just got up the next day and redid it.

TR Is there something that you still feel like you have yet to do compositionally or in visual art?

RM Probably. Well, yeah, *probably*. [laughs] Certainly! For example, I'm going back and picking up some of the instruments I haven't played for a while. I know my dog, Shuggie, would prefer it if I would play some of the higher instruments every now and then. His preference is the higher instruments, and he's very talented.<sup>4</sup>

Yeah, I better do that. So thanks for bringing that up. Because he's talented to the point that he can sing multiple voices and so on like that. And he's hip to overdubbing and stuff, because we play something together as a duet, and then I overdub it. I try different things out with him, and he can recognize different things if I do chromatic patterns or so on and so forth and all of that. So, yeah, I'm definitely going to start pulling out my soprano.

TR I think that's kind of a good closer, actually. Thank you so much for your time and we want to wish you a happy belated birthday. Did you do anything special on your day?

RM Yeah, it's just another day. What did I do? I did some good stuff. I spent some time with my daughter; she made me a big chocolate cake and all these different kinds of things. She inspires me so much. I mean, if I show her my paintings, she knows a lot. Really. I had to stop by my repair man, Brian, and he lives out there by my daughter. He lives in Sun Prairie. And so many people called me and wrote me and so on and so forth. So, it was a great day, actually.

1 American painter, sculptor, and print-maker active from the 1930s to his death in 1985.

2 *That Which I Should Have Done I Did Not Do (The Door)* 1931–1941.

3 *Conversations I and II*, both released on Wide Hive Records.

4 Mitchell has performed duos with his dog, Shuggie, as recently as 2021's Boreal Festival in Bergen. Shuggie is presented on video.

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# ROSCOE MITCHELL AT MILLS COLLEGE: CHRISTOPHER LUNA-MEGA

Zeena Parkins

*Editor's Note: Zeena Parkins—a revolutionary thinker, musician, composer, and educator herself—took the time to interview a number of Roscoe Mitchell's colleagues and students for this issue. Three of these interviews, with ex-students who worked with Roscoe on the transcription and orchestration of his music for recent large-ensemble events, are featured here with special thanks to William Winant, the Eclipse Quartet, and Roco Cordova, for their deep insights that space forbids including.*

*These conversations celebrate the collaborative nature of Roscoe's work, his method of teaching, and his ways of learning from his students. After Parkins' introduction below, the interviews will be interspersed between other articles to keep the overall text broken down to a digestible size and to give the full due to each of the artists/students that they feature.*

Roscoe Mitchell taught at Mills College for twelve years, holding the distinguished Darius Milhaud Chair of Composition. While living in the East Bay, he continued long-term relationships with local artists, like visionary scholar, inventor, composer David Wessel (1942–2014). And, in his never-ending pursuit for locating/divining musical hotspots, Roscoe formed new working relationships, rehearsal partners, and friendships that generated more great music. It was an extremely productive time for Roscoe.

For everyone at Mills, Roscoe was a force to be reckoned with, always working, always improving. His artistry is focused on self-respect, deep inquiry, curiosity, and an unwavering desire to upend the next challenge. And, of course, there is his legendary four hours-a-day practice regime. He set the bar very high for all of us in the Mills community.

Roscoe always follows the music—music-making at a supreme, uncompromising level. He hears it; he wants to be near it, understand it, interact with it. He commands a reverence. He is a genuine workaholic: practicing alone in his office, giving private lessons to students, or playing Baroque pieces weekly with harpsichordist Belle Bulwinkle (piano faculty, Mills College). He was often spotted in the hallways sporting a dapper suit, or outside sharing a cigarette with Willie Winant or James Fei under the shade of the Eucalyptus trees. During department meetings he rarely said anything, but when asked for an opinion, he gave a clear, insightful response without fail.

The following interviews give a brief look into some of the important relationships that students had with Roscoe while he was living in the Milhaud House in faculty village on the Mills campus. In listening to former students speak about Roscoe, what is most evident is his generosity. Roscoe provided us with the op-



portunity to be in close proximity to a life lived with rigor, in devotion to music. At Mills, he created a micro-community that swirled around this force of devotion. This offers a starting point to understand the nature of his creative practice, as it passes through resting spots in the between-spaces of pedagogy, improvisation, composition, performance, and documentation.

Here we get a glimpse into the mechanisms of making music as Roscoe sought out different animated points of contact within the Mills community. What were Roscoe's various strategies for these interactions? How did it work? What's tricky is that Roscoe often doesn't say much. He chooses his collaborators carefully and then doesn't micro-manage. He sits and listens.

While teaching at Mills, a new phase of Roscoe's career emerged. He started to receive numerous commissions for orchestra pieces. It was an exciting moment, but he was teaching full time and deadlines were often tight. Roscoe chose his source material for many of these new orchestral works from previously recorded improvisations. He had already set a precedent for revisiting earlier works, and transforming them over the course of many years, refusing the notion of an untouchable finished composition. He gave permission for an ongoing engagement with the materials. Within this model, elements of various works are reconsidered, reimagining musical elements from different perspectives. Roscoe used this precedent to investigate how pieces might migrate to other orchestration and to different kinds of players. What is revealed about the essence of a composition through these translations?

Roscoe was particularly interested in transforming pieces from *Conversations I*—a collection of improvised compositions by Roscoe Mitchell (saxophones), Kikanju Baku (percussion), and Craig Taborn (piano/electronics)—into orchestral works. In creating the transcriptions and orchestrations, he sought the help of several people around the country, including a number of current and former students from Mills College. With this cross-generational team, new readings and interventions emerged as these improvisations morphed into their new expanded settings.

As demonstrated consistently throughout his career, Roscoe's vision resists definitions of what a work can do or should be. By example, Roscoe offered us at Mills new ways to think about teaching, creative processes, and the ever-malleable locations and meanings of improvisation and composition.

#### INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER LUNA-MEGA<sup>1</sup>

Chris met Roscoe at Mills when he was a graduate student in the Music Department between 2011–2013.

CLM [Roscoe] knew that I was working with transcriptions and the translation of non-musical events into music for performers. He was teaching the advanced orchestration class, and he invited me to be his TA, which I was super grateful and excited for . . . and financially relieved.

Roscoe was very interested in how I was embarking on the transcription process of something as abstract as water. When working with Roscoe, I always had the feeling that I was talking with a friend. More than feedback, it was the questions he was asking that were allowing me to clarify my processes.

After graduating from Mills, a great saxophonist that was in my class, Josh Marshall,<sup>2</sup> emailed me saying, "Roscoe is wondering if you'd be interested in doing a project with him. It's a project for the Iceland Symphony Orchestra with Ilan Volkov for the Tectonics Festival." Am I interested!? That is not really a question; it's an honor. I got the email on December 20th, and I spoke with Roscoe on December 22. He told me we needed to have the score and parts ready by the first week of February. Oh, wow!!! I mean, I'll give it my best, you know.

ZP The trio version of *Splatter* is a spectacular jewel; so dense, so compact. How does one transcribe and translate it into an orchestra piece?

CLM For the transcription, I needed to create a score that non-improvisers can read; a score you could give to someone that allows them to get into the sonic world that is happening in an improvisation.

ZP Did he say anything about the task or how he wanted you to approach it? He knew about your relationship to transcription, which is very deep already.

CLM He gave me the details of the players, but he didn't give me any kind of prompt as far as what needs to happen, or how I should approach it. I was very interested in knowing from a technical point, what was happening in the saxophone, so that I could extrapolate that into the orchestral writing. In my initial vision of the project, I wanted to check with Roscoe and find out how all of the multiphonics were working, what kind of tonguing [he was using], how he created all of these polyphonic moments in *Splatter*. It's linear polyphony in the sense of different ranges that are constantly talking to each other. You get the sense of the line because it is constantly being iterated. But with the deadline, reality hits, and we didn't have the time to meet about what he's doing in terms of the multiphonics or a particular technique.

ZP Were you familiar with the piece or that trio before you said yes?

CLM I had heard the *Conversations* record while I was at Mills,



because I was getting my feet wet with everything that all of you were doing there. And Roscoe told me that certain pieces were already chosen. I remember, I wanted to do *Ride the Wind* but Dan (McKemie) had already chosen it. I was very interested in the impossibility [of transcribing an improvisation]. What would be a crazy piece to try to tackle?

I chose *Splatter*, knowing it would be challenging because of what's going on in it. On that piece, Craig Taborn is actually not playing piano, he's playing electronics. But if I achieved what I thought could be achieved with this piece, it would be an incredible experience. And then we went from there.

ZP I was intrigued by the profound difficulty of transcribing Craig's parts. This is where your skill of translating water or wind came to the fore, because you're dealing with a translation that is not just identifying the pitches or the rhythm. Perhaps it's like translating poetry from one language to another, where it is not always possible for a literal one-to-one translation of meaning. Its musicality, and its sensibility.

CLM The decision of how to deal with that component came at an interesting time, as this project opened the door to automatic transcription for me. In this type of transcription, software identifies the harmonic spectra and their different onsets and offsets. It's giving you the content of what the software is getting, which often-times is different from what the user's ears perceive. That year, I had just begun getting my feet wet with that. A good friend of mine, Max Tfirm, helped me to devise a patch on MaxMSP to be able to enter *Splatter*, and it gave me some pitch data of the electronics.

ZP Of course it's giving you only one aspect of the content.

CLM It's giving you, let's say, undigested sonic data. The ears are still very necessary even with that.

ZP You are making musical decisions about the content and feeling of the sound based on the data that you have collected, and then you hear how it interacts with the other instruments. It's very complex.

CLM It is. The automatic-transcription-derived portion of the score was limited to one section of the piece in which the strings play different clusters. This string material emulated the timbral clouds that Craig was generating in the electronics. It ended up being material that I liked in the piece. It made formal sense, but it didn't germinate into a process of larger consequences. If I had a year, and maybe some assistance, the full electronics would have been there.

I was happy with the piece. And of course, it became something different than the original *Splatter*. It felt similar to my translations of nature into instrumental music. The complexity of the

noise characteristic in nature is reduced. It's like a lo-fi version of nature. This is not in a pejorative sense, but in the sense that the complexity is reduced to a degree. This reduction in complexity can actually help the listener understand complex phenomena a little bit better.

The orchestral version of *Splatter* makes it more intelligible for people who are maybe not used to that kind of sound. I see it as a strength of the piece. But there are some weaknesses as well, because I did not grasp that potency, that energy of the untamed sound. And by untamed, I don't mean that Roscoe is not taming it—we know how obsessive he is with his sound—it's more of this wildness that is in the piece...

ZP What would it take to translate that? You translate wind after all. How do you put a frame or boundary around it to identify and shift it from one context to another?

CLM It's still a question that I'm asking myself. If I were to do another improvisation piece, either Roscoe's or whoever's, I would probably use notation strategies that are a little bit less determinate.

ZP Okay, so that's something to talk about, because you're making a translation between sensibilities, not just between the sounds. When you go into an orchestral environment you encounter musicians who, for the most part, are not improvisers. They're trained to receive their musical information on fully notated scores, and they are very good at making the translation of those notes on the page into music. What happens when you begin with a piece that was generated from an improvisation. How would you articulate that?

CLM It's got many aspects to consider. There are many ways of controlling a sound. I know Roscoe controls his sound in a way that there's going to be a high degree of noise, but in the conservatory, control means a higher degree of pitch. Pitch is essential. Noise is undesirable.

ZP Tell me about working with Ilan Volkov in Iceland. Both you and Roscoe were hearing the orchestral version of *Splatter* for the first time.

CLM I think we had maybe three rehearsals, and then a fourth was the dress rehearsal. The first rehearsal was intense, because you have to come to terms with the fact that many of the things you have planned are not going to sound. There's a section of the piece that is more discernible in terms of melodic contour. That material I found very interesting in *Splatter*, because it was not foregrounded, but it was kind of there. I gave that material to the bassoons. I don't think it was a good orchestration choice, because I wanted that to be louder. And at least with the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra, it did not have the body that it needed to have.

I needed some material to be wilder in terms of noise content. And that was the kind of thing that I was trying to convey to Ilan. Roscoe and I thought the piece was feeling a little bit loose in terms of the sound. We needed intensity and punch in the piece, and it was not there. And so Ilan came up with this idea: Roscoe would go on stage and improvise over certain sections of the orchestral version. Roscoe had other compositions that used improvisation, and it was built into the structure of the piece. In *Splatter* that was not the case, so it was a very tricky thing. Two hours before the concert, Roscoe and I were designing points for improvisation.

ZP So together you picked three or four places?

CLM Exactly. And he just said, “You cue me.” I was sitting in row one giving him signs as I looked at the score.

ZP Like a side conductor! That’s amazing.

CLM It was a great experience, but I wish that we had the time to actually rework the score. Both Roscoe and I were not very happy with how that worked. We felt like the orchestra got in the way of Roscoe’s improvising, and that he was getting in the way of the orchestral material.

We had different performances of that piece with other orchestras: the Orchestra del Teatro Comunale di Bologna and also the performance with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra.<sup>3</sup> I feel like both of those versions had that punch that the pieces needed. In the Bologna version, the conductor was Tonino Battista, and that was for the Angelica Festival. It was a different size orchestra, so there was the ability to have a little bit more gain in their sound. That was one thing, but then another thing was the expressive traits of a culture, a sensibility. The Italians were willing to push their sound a little bit harder, their dynamic range was a little bit wider, and their intensity was louder.

Also, Tonino Battista did a very interesting thing by slowing down the piece considerably. It made the sound bigger. It was very slow compared to my initial idea of tempo, but when I adjusted, it all made sense.

The most successful version of the piece was the one that the Montreal Toronto Art Orchestra performed. Roscoe and I had the luxury of working with the musicians five hours a day for five days. Many of those performers were improvisers. The drummers that we had were improvisers, and they were reading all of the drum sections that I had transcribed from Kikanju (Baku). They said: “We get the idea. How much do you want us to stick to the notation? Or should we just go for it?” I said, absolutely, just go for it. They made it better, because the sound was more visceral, bigger, and free from the temporal grid imposed by music notation.

It sounded more in the spirit of what Kikanju was doing. And the actual content didn’t change much.

ZP That’s a beautiful trajectory from the premiere to finally getting the most successful version where the drummers went off part. What does that tell you?

CLM If I was to redo this, first it would have to involve musicians that are comfortable with improvisation, and the notation would allow for them to be more in the moment. I remember Roscoe calling me after listening to that version of *Splatter*.<sup>4</sup> This is one of the highlights of my life. He called me in tears, full of excitement. He was very touched, thanking me for the work I had done. Just having Roscoe express that level of excitement with the collaboration was truly a gift.

ZP What did you take back to your own work from it?

CLM I have considered many possibilities for the translation of environmental soundscapes into music for performers. The most feasible possibility usually is working with professional musicians who are not improvisers but are able to read quite accurately and provide the *environmental sonic translations* with their own angle of interpretation. These musicians bring qualities that I often find fascinating and gratifying, even when they deviate from my original conception.

For the task of translating improvisation into notated music for performers, I would prefer to write for ensembles like the Montreal Toronto Orchestra, for an ensemble of improvisers or trained musicians who are comfortable with different sorts of notation, in order to convey certain events—graphic, indeterminate, proportional, text, etc.

On the other hand, for the task of translating complex events of natural and anthropogenic sound, it is ideal to work with performers trained in both conventional and extended notations that allow the most precision. I agree with [Iannis] Xenakis that complex events of nature require very precise notation rather than indeterminacy in order to prevent the stylistic backgrounds of the performers from bleeding into the musical idea. Precise notation for complex events of nature works both as a prescription—as a score—and as a description of the sound.

ZP What does that mean for you?

CLM I need to use a notational system that can be flexible depending on the sonic contents. I am protecting the acoustic image that I have analyzed through sonograms, computer-assisted transcription, and my own ears. For example, a bird is creating rhythms happening in fractions of a second which is the filter through which I’m listening to them. Of course, it’s not the bird, it’s me who is listening to that bird. It’s still my aesthetics, and what I think that

the world is sounding like. So, notation is a descriptive layer, but it's also a protective layer. If I use indeterminacy or improvisation, and the original sound source is not fully understood by the performer with her own ear, then the translational work that I'm doing can be easily lost.

ZP So, what you're saying is that you need the musicians to adhere to the specificity of the notation. But there's something about that translation that needs, at least at moments, that kind of openness. So that's the difference.

CLM Right. And, for my own work, it's not a clear-cut answer. If you're dealing with material where there's a predominance of noise, some degree of improvisation there might portray that more accurately.

ZP Yeah, it's wonderful. And what an experience.

CLM It's been a great project. I felt very happy to be able to participate with Roscoe on that and we had such a long trajectory for performances. We had four performances of the piece. It was wonderful to discuss what the music needed as collaborators.

1 Christopher Luna-Mega is a composer and improviser from Mexico City. He is interested in focused listening, instrumental performance strategies, audio technology, and interdisciplinary collaboration. His work analyzes sounds and data from natural and urban environments and translates them into notated music for performers and electronics in various forms of media. These interests and skills which were evident when Chris was still a part of the Mills community, proved immensely useful for Roscoe.

2 Roscoe asked Josh to write liner notes to his 2017 release, *Discussions*. They can be found here: <https://www.widehive.com/linernotesdiscussions>

3 Premiere: April 15, 2016. Iceland Symphony Orchestra, cond. Ilan Volkov. Harpa Concert Hall, Reykjavik. Subsequent Performances: October, 2016. Montreal-Toronto Art Orchestra, cond. Gregory Oh. Gesù, Montreal, Canada; October, 2016. Montreal-Toronto Art Orchestra, cond. Gregory Oh. The Music Gallery, Toronto, Canada; May, 2017. BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, cond. Ilan Volkov. Grand Hall, Glasgow; May, 2017. Orchestra del Teatro Comunale di Bologna, cond. Tonino Battista. Teatro Manzoni, Bologna. From Chris Luna in an email received August 23, 2022.

4 The name of the album where this version is featured is *Ride the Wind*, on Nessa records.

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# ROSCOE MITCHELL AND THE PATH OF MOST RESISTANCE

Ken Vandermark

On August 28th of 1976, Roscoe Mitchell played a solo concert at the Jazz Festival Willisau in Switzerland, a couple of days after a performance with the Art Ensemble of Chicago. This set was not the one originally planned. Anthony Braxton was scheduled to play, but cancelled at the last minute, and Roscoe was asked to perform in his stead. A recording of this concert was included on the Nessa Records album, *Nonaah*, originally released in 1977, and re-issued in 2008 with added material. Mitchell's description of the experience is quoted in the liner notes:

*I went out there and got this tension thing. It was a battle. I had to make the noise and whatever was going on with the audience part of the piece. The music couldn't move till they respected me, until they realized that I wasn't going anywhere, and it helped to create the environment the piece was to take place in... building tensions... and when I finally did release it my alto had just given in to me (it said, "OK, you can play me now"). I started to open it up soundwise by putting in smears and different sounds, and by the time it finally reached the end at the encore piece it all pulled together.<sup>1</sup>*

The tension and battle Roscoe describes on that occasion is not exaggerated. Listening to the recording makes it clear how contentious the circumstances were. Immediately before the concert began the audience was told by a Swiss announcer that Anthony Braxton was not going to appear, and Roscoe Mitchell would be playing instead. The crowd audibly voices its disappointment before Roscoe starts a 22:39 musical *tour de force*, which begins by repeating *Nonaah*'s short, angular melodic line while members of the audience shout and whistle their displeasure. At 5:20, the performance of that phrase begins to come apart at the seams as Mitchell starts to improvise more and more freely, pushing the material to the breaking point. By the end of the piece, he has not defeated the crowd, he has won them over. He accomplishes this not by pandering to whatever expectations the audience may have had, but by getting them to *listen* to his music on *his* terms; not by "replacing" Anthony Braxton but presenting Roscoe Mitchell in full force.

The connection between Mitchell and Braxton adds another layer to Roscoe's momentous and legendary performance. Throughout the history of jazz and improvised music, there have been creative dynamics between certain pairs of artists that helped shape the course of the music's history, such as the relationships between Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young, or between Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane. Though there were a number of brilliant, innovative, and essential reed players that were part of the watershed period for Chicago's Association for the Advancement



of Creative Musicians (AACM), a unique creative association existed between Roscoe Mitchell and Anthony Braxton. Roscoe's album, *Sound* (Delmark Records, 1966), is credited as the first document of music created by the AACM; Anthony's initial recording as a leader, *3 Compositions of New Jazz* (Delmark, 1968), came two years later, and heralded a new compositional voice for the international scene. Mitchell traveled to Paris with the Art Ensemble in early 1969; Braxton arrived with members of the Creative Construction Company a few months later. Both artists are staggering multi-instrumentalists, utilizing the entire family of reed instruments and—in the case of Roscoe—also “little instruments” and percussion. And, like Rollins and Coltrane, who recorded *Tenor Madness* together, they also collaborated on an album, called *Roscoe Mitchell: Duets with Anthony Braxton* (recorded in 1976 and released by Sackville in 1978) that featured Roscoe's compositions on Side A and Anthony's on Side B.

Though the entire range of music produced by Mitchell and Braxton has had a profound impact on me, it is their investigation and development of solo material that has been perhaps most significant. This creative legacy goes back to the very beginning of their careers; is an essential aspect of their concert and recorded output; and has a level of invention and innovation that is remarkable for any composer/improviser from any time period on any instrument. Anthony Braxton led the way on this path, recording the seminal album *For Alto* in 1969 (Delmark, 1971). Roscoe Mitchell's first foray of this kind, *Solo Saxophone Concerts*, was documented in 1973 (Sackville, 1974). As with the Willisau concert, Roscoe's composition, “Nonaah,” plays a key role on his initial solo recording, with versions of the piece opening the album and concluding it. That composition's significance in regard to Mitchell's creative arc has a parallel with the pieces Braxton documented on *For Alto*: Both of these sets of material lay the foundation for a collection of independent vocabulary and grammar that each musician has continued to develop for decades. In George Lewis' book, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*, Muhal Richard Abrams stated that his “initial advice to Mitchell concerning composition was to ‘write down what you're playing on your horn. He proceeded to do that—that's where “Nonaah” and stuff like that comes from—and he's never looked back since.’”<sup>2</sup>

It is Abrams' compositional advice to Roscoe Mitchell, to “write down what you're playing on your horn,” that became a guiding principle for the development of my own solo music system. This process began in the 1990s when I realized that nearly all of the contemporary composers and improvisers that I admired had created unique solo music. This is especially true of the musicians

in the United States from the Midwest—in the AACM (Chicago) and Black Artists Group (St. Louis)—and in Europe, particularly from the scenes based in the Netherlands, Germany, and England, all of whom became established in the mid-to-late 1960s. In terms of early conception and creative impact—both for reed players and anyone interested in creative music—Roscoe Mitchell was at the forefront as a composer and improviser for unaccompanied instrumental material.

Since the start of the millennium, I have pursued a variety of strategies to build my own viable solo music by utilizing musical “templates” without conventional notation; attempting to work in a completely spontaneous manner like the English trombonist, Paul Rutherford; and recording in spaces with extreme acoustics. When the pandemic hit in March of 2020, I took a hard look at what I was trying to accomplish with my solo material because, in isolation, that was all I could really do.

From the beginning of my search in the 1990s, I was troubled by two factors. The first was a paradox: If only one person was generating all of the material, how would it be possible to create the necessary spontaneity and surprise connected to improvised music?

The second issue was related to a statement attributed to the English guitarist, Derek Bailey, who said, “The problem with the saxophone is that every time you pick it up, it's jazz.” As I considered the commonalities between the types of music that I enjoy the most, and how I might be able to convey these elements in my solo compositions, I reflected on how I got into experimental jazz and improvised music in the first place—through hearing Joe McPhee's solo album, *Tenor*, (Hat Hut Records, 1977) as a teenager. That recording, with its combination of melodicism and extended saxophone techniques, permanently altered my perspective on what music could be.

As I re-examined my goals for creating a personal solo music I realized the direct connection between Joe McPhee's approach and that of Roscoe Mitchell. Both had found ways around the enigma of creating improvisational surprise in their solo material, and both had circumvented Bailey's dilemma. For example, the intensity with which Roscoe pushes against sonic conventions, heard so readily in the above-mentioned performance of “Nonaah,” goes beyond the limits of control to create a vibrating environment of unpredictability. And a listener would be hard pressed to include Roscoe's Willisau performance of “Nonaah,” though played on alto saxophone, as being emblematic of the jazz mainstream. Those references provided guidelines that helped free me from conceptual issues I had been contending with for almost three decades. Coupled with reflections on Mu-



hal Richard Abrams' advice to Roscoe Mitchell to "write down what you play on the horn," these factors gave me a sense of self-determination that enabled the creative breakthroughs needed to compose and improvise the music for the solo album *The Field Within A Line* (Corbett vs. Dempsey: 2021), recorded in September of 2020.

Mitchell was on a panel discussion with me that took place at the Chicago Cultural Center on April 17, 2013. Bassist Joshua Abrams, who was in attendance, asked Mitchell what he did to prepare for a solo concert. I found his answer to be both surprising and highly informative. He simply said that he first needed to know how long he was expected to play, then he'd practice solo material leading up to the performance for twice that duration. Mitchell cited the work ethic of Michael Jordan as his reasoning behind that strategy. How hard does an athlete like Jordan work to maintain the conditioning needed to play basketball at the highest level? The message I understood through his answer was this: to meet the physical demands of a solo concert at Roscoe Mitchell's level, it's necessary to be able to go twice as far as anyone else to do so. When I think about the work it will take to compose and perform the music I want to play, solo or otherwise, that communiqué from Roscoe is always on my mind.

1 Terry Martin, *Nonaah* (Michigan: Nessa Records, 1977 and 2008), 4 and 5.

2 George Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 70.

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# MAKING THE MUSIC YOURS!— CONSTRUCTING “THE MAZE”

Dr. Tyshawn Sorey

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## THE RECORDING, “SOUND,” AND THE ADVENT OF “LITTLE INSTRUMENTS”

In 1966, Roscoe Mitchell began to present large-scale compositions that would later become major AACM works. One of which was the twenty-one-minute composition, “Sound,” featured on Mitchell’s album of the same name. In Mitchell’s words, the composition “deals, like I say, with sound, and the musicians are free to make any sound they think will do, any sound that they hear at a particular time. That could be like somebody who felt like stomping on the floor . . . well, he would stomp on the floor.”

Performed by a sextet assembled by Mitchell, and comprised of AACM members, “Sound,” while maintaining a high degree of spontaneity and many pointillist moments, also evokes the feeling of meditation—rather than simply a passive listening/playing experience. Mitchell and the members of his sextet perform on their primary instruments. Moreover, the group participates in the minimal use of what would later become known as “little instruments” (e.g., the trumpeter Lester Bowie also performs on harmonica while other sextet members perform on small bicycle bells and the like).

Shortly after the formation of the AACM, “little instruments” began making their way into AACM ensembles more regularly. Bassist and composer Malachi Favors has been noted among several early AACM colleagues as being the first person to start thinking about incorporating small instruments and found objects as a part of his bass setup. Other instrumentalists in the AACM soon thereafter followed suit. In a recent telephone conversation, I had asked Mitchell how this practice began to take form and he remembers:

*Around 1967 or so I had a quartet that included Lester Bowie, Malachi, Phillip Wilson (drummer) and myself, and then Phillip left to go and play with the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. And at that point, we never really went out looking for drummers to replace him—we just kept rehearsing our music.*

Favors affirms his contributions to what then became the Roscoe Mitchell Art Ensemble. When asked by music journalist Ted Panken about how he would bring these little instruments into the group, Favors remarked that after having attended an African ballet during the 1950s, he felt that the music he experienced there should be included in jazz. Furthermore—and this is also due in part to Mitchell’s growing curiosity and openness to develop his music far beyond what had been going on in jazz during that time—Favors and other members decided to bring some of these instruments and play them in concert, a practice that continues to the present day.

The importance of this practice as related to “Sound” and subsequent pieces is that it called for a fresh approach to composition for performers, in that they are required to think critically and compositionally in establishing their ideas, no matter the level of virtuosity. They had to be very well attuned to the wide-open spatial character that “Sound,” for example, possesses so as to wholly maintain its compositional identity throughout the entire performance. One of the key aspects of why “The Maze” [from *L-R-G / The Maze / S II Examples*] is successful is Mitchell’s life-long premise that in order to be a great improviser, you’d have to have some understanding of composition. (It is important to mention here that six of the performers on “The Maze” are also composers.) It should also be noted that the idea of “not following” is one of Mitchell’s cardinal preferences when it comes to spontaneously composing in real time with other musicians, whether they are experienced in it or not; the performers must listen and respond—either in silence or with counterintuitive events—to whatever is taking place in the moment. This line of practice has remained consistent throughout all of Mitchell’s work in both formal and spontaneous fields of composition. In “The Maze,” however, this idea of “matching” (which is notated during the second macro section of the piece) exploits the very fine line between this business of literal “following” in improvised contexts—and the two behaviors are often confused. Roscoe continues:

*I found that a lot of times in improvisation, a lot of people don’t really know what to do. Especially inexperienced improvisers, who always tend to make the same mistakes. That became a problem for me. I figured that I would have to try and find a way to give the musician some information to play but to treat it in a way like in improvisation. That solves the problem . . . so, then, each time it’s different. And doing it this way makes it so that the musicians don’t get up there and follow each other behind the music. This helps to build upon the concentration and focus that you will need [in order] to play this music.*

#### ASSEMBLAGE, AND THE FORMATION OF THE ART ENSEMBLE OF CHICAGO

I would like to briefly make the connection with what had been taking place in the black visual art world in Los Angeles during the 1960s, as I feel that there is a direct correlation with the work of the AACM. Let me start by stating that I also view “The Maze” as a piece of music for percussion ensemble that essentially makes a visual statement in a number of ways when all

of the instruments are set up. I say that because it is essentially a labyrinth that one goes to where you can create all of these different sounds in one large sonic complex. And regarding the spatial aspect of the piece, when it’s really spread out, one gets the sense that the sounds are *moving* through the space, becoming almost like a stereophonic effect.

By drawing a link between the Black Arts Movement and the activity in the AACM (as trombonist, composer and musicologist George Lewis has discussed in his article *Expressive Awesomeness*), let us consider what had been taking place in the assemblage movement in Los Angeles during the 1960s. The black artists from that movement often created collage structures that involved the use of found objects as a way of asserting their cultural histories. One of the best known artists from that movement, Noah Purifoy, is considered the progenitor of that movement, and his style would involve the transformation of debris and other discarded material into a creative work of art. While this ideal is very similar to what was happening in kinetic art several years before—as well as the work of Cubists, Fluxus artists, and Dadaists—it was also dissimilar to these respective movements in that Purifoy’s work was essentially an affirmation of black cultural nationalism.

Why do I mention this? It is not widely known that in fact several of these AACM artists, such as Mitchell, Joseph Jarman, and Muhal Richard Abrams were also painters and performance artists who contributed to the legacy of boundary erosion by integrating dance and theater as part of the work’s whole, which in itself is a real-time assemblage of creative disciplines. Furthermore, the instrumental setups of the Art Ensemble of Chicago can be considered a universe of assemblages, where each ensemble member operates in the group’s musical activities from his own “sound station.” By 1969–1970, each member of the Art Ensemble had accumulated his collection of “little instruments” that they would then use in concerts to exploit a sonic potential that, as Lewis stated, “evoke[s] memories, histories, geographies, and personalities.” We could also infer from the assemblage movement that while the AEC’s interest is in establishing a global aesthetic, the other objective in the work would be to celebrate the legacy of “Great Black Music: from Ancient to the Future”—a slogan that has since remained as part of the ensemble’s legacy to black creative music practice. The co-existence of these various assemblages progresses all the way to the conception of “The Maze,” which is a highly elaborate instantiation of assemblage whereby all the musicians must equally contribute by using all of these instruments (homemade instruments, found objects, etc.) to further solidify the composite reality of the AACM’s performance dynamics.

By early 1970, the Art Ensemble of Chicago recruited the Rochester NY-born drummer and percussionist Don Moye. Moye was living in Paris around that time and had been inspired by the group so much that he “got hooked on the dream of playing with them . . . [because] the open-ended creative aspect of what they were doing [was] what hooked me.” Moye has remained a member of the ensemble to the present day and would end up being another one of Mitchell’s most important collaborators. Moye’s entry into the ensemble is important to mention: upon joining the Art Ensemble, the amount of instruments that were set up in a musician’s given space had increased exponentially. By this point each ensemble member’s sonic palette would transform into a very large assemblage of musical instruments, percussion instruments, and found objects such as dinner chimes, a balafon, car horns, a doorbell, African log drums, plumbing brass pipes, etc.

#### ANALYSIS:

##### INTRODUCTION AND PERSONNEL

In light of what we learned so far about Mitchell’s work, “The Maze” is essentially a logical extension of the music that he performed with the Art Ensemble of Chicago and other collaborations with like-minded musicians of the AACM up until that point.

The personnel who participated in the realization of this piece in its two performances are all AACM musicians. Four musicians are of the Art Ensemble of Chicago—Mitchell on his percussion setup, Moye, Jarman, and Favors. Also included in the work are saxophonists Henry Threadgill, Anthony Braxton, Douglas Ewart, and drummer-percussionist Thurman Barker. From this list, six of the musicians are not trained percussionists; the six non-percussionists are more involved with percussion instruments from a purely sonic and melodic standpoint.

What makes the sound world of “The Maze” distinct from twentieth-century music composed up until that point is the addition of homemade instruments invented by the performers themselves. A couple of instruments to note in this family are Braxton’s set of carefully tuned garbage cans and Threadgill’s percussion instrument known as the “Hubkaphone.” Threadgill describes this instrument as:

*a set of pitched and unpitched hubcaps. They’re eight hubcaps strung and hung and played in a percussion style. Almost like a large set of vibes or marimba. They lay flat, and they’re all classic hubcaps because that’s the only material that has any kind of a good quality sound.*

*Because, you know, everything from the ’60s on is basically trash. In the ’60s, they were still making things in America that were of quality, but by the end of the ’60s, America was on its way downhill in terms of making anything of quality. Radios. Hubcaps. I don’t care what it is.*

By the time Mitchell began working on “The Maze,” it became apparent that the binaries of composer/performer, improviser/composer, Eurocentric/Afrological, performance/virtuosity dynamics, and interpreter/improviser are gravely problematized in the total output of his work. This is evidenced in his growing catalog of works for instrumentations ranging from solo saxophone to orchestra, most of which incorporate various forms of notation and at times do/do not involve improvisation.

#### INSPIRATION FOR THE WORK’S CREATION AND ITS AESTHETIC DEMANDS ON THE PERFORMER

The inspiration for “The Maze” came from Mitchell’s years in Chicago and going to different performances that featured his collaborators. He would then get together with all of the players individually, write down the list of instruments that they used, and then try to come up with a system for the score so that when he would write a performance indication into the score for a musician, then that musician would already know what Mitchell was asking them to do, or what instrument he wanted the musician to use.

“The Maze” is perhaps one of the finest examples of Mitchell’s dialogic relationship with form and spontaneity and is a unique work that I feel can certainly be included among manifold major percussion works of the twentieth century. At the same time, I find “The Maze” to be separate and highly distinct from that tradition. First, “The Maze” is not a composition that allows for an improviser-performer to just simply do whatever they want to do without any kind of awareness of the composition’s sonic identity. Rather, the piece explicitly favors an *egalitarian aesthetic* with respect to composition and improvisation—to “play compositionally in the moment,” so to speak. All performers have prescribed opportunities within the score to explore different sonic areas in their arsenal while they collaboratively interact with notated materials in a way that obliterates the notions regarding what is improvised and what is composed, thus giving the piece its TOTAL meditative character. In advocating this aesthetic from that point of view, Mitchell posits that to play his music properly the performers must “deal with whatever atmosphere the composition sets up [ . . . ] If everybody is trying to constructively build something together, then it works. [E]verybody stimulates each other in this music.”



“The Maze” is a composition written for these particular musicians, all of whom are improviser-composers. As Mitchell describes in the liner notes to the recording:

*A lot of the sounds I use are special to the individual [...] getting all this information from these people is like having a bunch of photographs at your disposal, where you can start pasting the photographs together into a collage. I have all these different sounds at my disposal—I can take these information sheets, put them around me, and then start to pick sounds. I know that these are strong sounds; I have almost twenty years’ experience of the people I’ve played with and with the AACM. That’s a whole experience for getting toward types of grounds that I want to cover musically.*

Given what we know already of Mitchell’s oeuvre, we are dealing with a composition that not only does away with the separatist (and I might add, essentialist) problems that continue to exist in so-called “new music” (at least when we’re speaking about the ternary concerning improvisation, composition, and performance), but we are looking at a work that deals with the concept of the “individual” as instrument. In this piece, improvisation and composition operate as one and the same. It can be heard as a composition. It can also be heard as an improvisation.

The notation in the score is a little unusual and, in some ways, contradicts with the actual performance of the work. All performers read from the same score, but it’s a little more complex than that. First, let me state that I don’t feel that Mitchell was preoccupied with having the piece performed “correctly” or “precisely” in the Eurocentric sense of such virtuosic principles or performance practices. Each performance of “The Maze” is unique and must have its own life—for it is a living structure. Secondly, there are no time signatures anywhere in the score. Third, the idea of what a “measure” is has been extended to a single page. In other words, contrary to much of Western conceptions on notation, each page is considered a “measure.” (So, when I’m referring to a particular measure during the analysis, I’m specifically referring to the page number indicated in the score.)

Each performer has a sound catalog from which they may use to perform the score. Therefore, the instrument names appear in three forms. The first case is when they appear above notated passages. The second, and more complicated case, is when

the instrument appears in brackets, followed by the letter “S,” simply indicating to the performer to make whatever sounds they wish to at that moment, for however long they wish. To complicate matters still, the letters “H” or “L” that precede the instrument name indicate the dynamic level with which the performer is required to improvise. (Interestingly, these do not appear as frequently in the score as a traditionally notated score might.) For Mitchell, having collaborated with these performers collectively for over fifteen years at the time of composing this piece, the indication of dynamics was not necessary—Mitchell trusted the performers’ natural abilities to intuitively and counter-intuitively respond in improvised settings; he understood already that the music would possess a “lived-in” quality. Thus, “The Maze” would serve more as a collective expression of community rather than as a technical exercise.

Rhythmic values, when placed on individual five-line staves, also may or may not be taken into account and are not measured by any tempo indications—notated passages that are written in the score do not have to be performed together, except for in places where vertical “cue points” are positioned in the score and thusly executed by all the performers. Otherwise, the players are allowed to execute their respective passages independently in any tempo that they desire. What this type of indeterminacy in performance determines is the understanding of when a given measure/page begins and how it ends. Even the measure-order is something of consideration prior to any performance. In Mitchell’s typical matter-of-fact demeanor, he recounts:

*This is the same thing that happens like in an improvisation. I mean, people are certainly allowed to play their own tempo; they are allowed to rest when they want to, and they are allowed to play when they want to [laughs].*

Using measure 11 in “The Maze” as an example, he goes on to explain the indeterminacy of performance:

*Let’s just say that, for instance, I wanted to play those twenty notes on page 11 [in the value of] slow whole notes. What this means is that I could be the last person playing that page! I’m not restricted by any tempo for any performance, and I can decide at any moment to keep going. On the recording, I played those notes at a much faster rate, but I didn’t really have to do that. Because doing that changes the shape of everything that is already happening there. That’s why everyone is reading from the same score. Everybody knows that once you cue or start playing, you’re not really “free” but you’re kind of free. If I play these twenty notes in any way I wanted, these folks here—like Henry, Anthony, and Joseph—*



*they're going to have to figure out a way to get to that fermata together . . . But that's not going to stop me or anyone else from flowing over that. A different thing that could've happened there is that Moye and Malachi's cue at the end of page 11 could end up as a duo before I bring in page 12.*

Pitch is another factor that is treated quite differently and is also something that Mitchell did not preoccupy himself with. All eight musicians on the recording interpret these pitches in various ways. During the first several pages of the score, especially, most pitches written for pitched percussion instruments are adhered to. However, the further the piece goes, the more the players deviate from the idea of performing “absolute pitches” and instead use certain pitches in a particular notated passage as targets or arrival points, evoking the sense of melodic directionality.

#### *Structure/Form*

In looking at the score—all thirty score pages are performed consecutively—and upon further review of its first recording, the piece is divided into two parts. There is also an inner structure within these two parts where there are three individual sections (indicated by I, II, and III), whereby the third of these sections contains its own sort of micro-structure. Among the ways that “The Maze” really strikes me (beyond how manifold textures within sound-groups are formed) is how Mitchell skillfully deals with the idea of affect and how he complicates the performance process of the piece from a physical, improvisatory, and listening standpoint (which I'll touch on later).

The simultaneous sounding of the large swinging bell (hereafter LSB, as played by Mitchell) and the timing bell (hereafter WB, as played by Ewart) functions as a central transitory element for “The Maze,” appearing four times throughout. This sound serves a particular purpose: one may sense this activity as a direct call to order—bringing the listener to attention in a way that prepares us for a new collection of musical experiences—or this may be viewed as a conclusion of the music heard before. Furthermore, I noticed that whenever this sound occurred, the overall energy shifts to a higher plane. While Mitchell's “groups of sound” approach is evident in this composition, the way that the players respond to each other becomes closer to the spirit present in a meditative, well thought-out, collective improvisation. Improvisation, here, functions as ritual in that the more you are in a certain space, the more intense the overall experience becomes, and the sense of time is altered. This is especially evident in the third large section of “The Maze.” This could also be viewed as the reason for it being the longest section of the piece, lasting around thirteen minutes.

#### *Analysis*

After a slow, ritual-like introduction performed by all members except Threadgill, Jarman initiates the beginning of a sound world at the beginning of measure 2 that has a dreamy, meditative effect on the listener and the performers. He begins with an ascending line leading to a minor-second interval. Mitchell joins in—as Jarman concludes his own passage—with a descending melodic figure towards another minor-second (as a way of extending Jarman's melodic line, but in a different register). Barker (on glockenspiel) begins his melodic phrase directly on Mitchell's minor second. (There is no cue point written into the score; I am inclined to believe that this was a spontaneous decision given the notation's unusual flexibility.) Then, a series of ascending gestures on two glockenspiels are performed in the high register as Barker completes his melodic phrase (performed by Mitchell on hard mallets and Braxton on softer mallets). Finally, Barker (now on marimba) abruptly ends this dreamlike affect with a very fast descending line. During this time, the order of events indicated in the score is somewhat flexible, and these events begin and end where they are supposed to (reading from left to right). However, the players start to deviate from this way of reading the score the further we get into the music.

Moving ahead to measure 3, Favors enters on nipple gong (on the note G, which interestingly fits into the tonal scheme of what is happening in the music at this point). While we return for a moment to the music we've just heard, the effect shifts with Moye's quiet entrance on his set of six gongs. Ewart then strikes a gong at a *mezzo forte* dynamic level on cue with Moye and Barker (still on glockenspiel) as the music continues to progress, but this time Threadgill begins to “darken up” the texture of the music by softly playing soft cymbal gong hits.

In measure 4, Mitchell abruptly shifts us into an entirely different area with very short, loud punctuations by balafon, bass drum, and chimes. The next series of these sounds are cued by Mitchell (now on dinner chimes and wood desk) and Jarman on tomtom. At the end of that measure, we return to the quiet activity that we experienced in measures 2–3. But what proceeds to happen in measure 5 is that the music that we heard in measures 2–4 now becomes truncated via the increase in density among the players. This is the first full measure where wood instruments are featured (balafon, three marimbas, and clave sticks) accompanied by Braxton playing a contrasting melodic phrase on tubular bells. The performance aspect of this measure is an anomaly from the rest of the

music: although the performance proposition is such that players are free to individually execute their passages at whatever tempo they want simultaneously, it is noted here that Barker (who suggests a tempo) and Threadgill are performing TOGETHER in sync at a tempo of 60 bpm as the others continue to perform at their individual tempi. This is the only time during the piece where more than one performer deals with notated rhythms from a tempo-based perspective.

Measure 6 transports the listener to another metallic sound world. For the first time, we begin to experience elements of improvisation performed in a ceremonial-type fashion by three AEC members (Jarman on a rack of cymbals, Favors on seal horn and tambourine—cued by Braxton’s third sound performed on the sloshing garbage can machine—and finally Mitchell on a set of swinging bells). The metallic instruments are performed at a soft dynamic as Braxton’s sounds on his garbage cans are much louder. This measure attributes a correlation to the AEC’s performance practice, where the performers are now operating independently from each other in an improvisation. Braxton then proceeds to improvise on marimba resonators (what Mitchell calls Marimba Can Machine, or MCM in the score), playing what are referred to as “bubbling sounds” and lighter “pebble sounds” (abbreviated as BS and LPS). Threadgill follows with ascending and descending passages on hackbrett, and Ewart enters with a very brief statement on wooden cowbells (temple blocks) just before Moye and Barker conclude this ceremonial music space with a B-natural octave tremolo. If one were to view the score while listening to the recording, they would naturally expect that Threadgill, Ewart, and Braxton would end this measure together—but this did not happen.

A unison texture is heard in measure 7. Following this event, the listener will experience the first of the four LSB-WB events in measure 8. This music signals the closing of the first large section of “The Maze,” while at the same time we enter a new sonic zone. This LSB-WB combination initiates a brief passage performed in unison by Braxton and Ewart respectively on tubular bells and hanging bells to further evoke the sense of closure of “The Maze”’s first macrostructure.

## SECTION II

### *Introduction*

Section II is one in which Mitchell’s idea of “groups” is made explicit. This is a part of “The Maze” where the textures become more uniform and “stereophonic” in motion.

58

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### *Analysis*

Measure 9 begins with a brief fanfare-like gesture featuring bicycle horns performed by Jarman, Moye, and Mitchell as well as Favors’ seal horn. A quartet is then featured performing primarily wood instruments (Braxton on washtub, Ewart on bamboo table, and Barker on marimba) with a phrase played by Threadgill on the Hubkaphone. In measure 10, we have departed from playing all notated pitch classes as written particularly in the marimba and glockenspiel passages played by Barker. This activity will continue all the way through the end of the score. Put another way, in measure 10, Barker does not treat pitch as “pitch,” but instead focuses only on the lower pitches in his passage as specific “targets.” As I indicated earlier in this writing, pitch was not something that Mitchell was preoccupied with; the notated melodic passages may be read from a directional point of view or from a range of high to low.

Measures 11 and 12 bring us back into a resonant zone—where we are in a predominantly metallic sound world for most of these measures. The rate of activity decreases during Favors’ arrival temple gong, leading us back into a meditative state that features Mitchell playing primarily dome bells and dinner chimes. Threadgill and Braxton join Barker and Mitchell on Hubkaphone and tubular bells respectively. The LSB-WB sonic event returns, but it does not serve the same formal function that it did before. Jarman, Braxton, and Threadgill are asked to match the sound of the large swinging bell on their respective instruments instead. Mitchell begins to perform a very slow, pensive melodic statement on dinner chimes that concludes this “matching/moving” texture.

Measures 13 and 14 contain an otherworldly mix of wood and metallic textures that are operating independently of each other (while Favors spontaneously contributes textures on the zither) before finally dissolving into a quieting performance of gongs by Threadgill, Ewart, Moye, and Favors, who is the last person to finish performing. What is notable in these two measures is that flexibility in interpretation is intensified (e.g. Favors performs his zither passage for a lengthy period before he plays a shorter gesture on two cans). Like the music we experience in measures 7 and 8, measure 15 is also a type of unison texture that is repeated twice, with the sound of Ewart’s doorbell functioning as a first ending. After the reiteration of this texture, the LSB-WB combination is performed as a second ending, and even more importantly, as a transition to the music we’re going to hear in Section III.

*Introduction*

Here, Mitchell continues to develop his “groups of sounds” concept, but the music becomes a lot more active, explorative, and highly expansive in this section. The duration of this section lasts nearly thirteen minutes, and the element of improvisation plays a dominating role in the music. The interpretive flexibility in the music is exercised to a larger degree here than anywhere else in the piece. All the musicians will extend their moments of spontaneity during this section; the measures become drastically longer in duration (e.g. measure 26 lasts for nearly two minutes). The physical aspect of the music also becomes intensified. The players did not move that much in the preceding sections. By contrast, the performers during Section III will find themselves switching between instruments with increasing frequency—sometimes even within a single measure or a very short passage. Finally, there is a marked contrast of shifting dynamics where there is a juxtaposition of sonic areas that range from the quiet, resonant gong music (like what we heard earlier in the piece) to several high-intensity structures. There are no transitions that lead into these sonic areas. Instead, Mitchell directly takes us into these zones through a series of “jump cuts.” There is also the curious sense of an extended ending (or a false ending) structure that happens three times during the last few minutes of the performance as some of the beginning moments of “The Maze” reappear in very interesting ways that bring us to its conclusion.

*Analysis: Shifting of moods and the first false ending*

In measures 16 and 17, Mitchell and Jarman perform a sonically active zone that features the use of metallic-sounding bell textures and the dominating, active cowbell sounds performed also by Mitchell and Moye. As the use of metal is primary here, the incorporation of rough-sounding textures performed by Braxton (on garbage cans) appears which moves us into a very compelling duet with Threadgill (on Hubkaphone and plumbing brass materials, respectively). When Favors interjects on the balafon and log drums, he spontaneously executes this material as opposed to playing it in a fixed, measured way. The mood suddenly shifts back in measure 20 to the dream-like character from the beginning of the piece for a moment with Mitchell (on glockenspiel and dinner chimes) accompanied by Favors (various instruments) and Ewart (metallic instruments), suggesting what sounds like a false recapitulation. When Ewart plays a spontaneous short texture on hanging bells, Favors then matches this moving sound with his

sloshing balafon sounds in measure 21. The return to glockenspiel at measure 20 can be viewed as a purposeful interruption of the flow in the balafon music that we heard in the previous measure. Two groups of sound are then featured simultaneously: short temple block and cowbell sounds are working concurrently with two elongated melodic passages performed by Barker and Braxton on glockenspiel. As Jarman and Ewart move slowly through their arsesals, an intense texture is quickly performed by Moye and Barker on drum set, which will later serve as a “jump cut” out of this resonant zone, leading us again into a third unison texture like the one in measure 7. I noted this as the first of three false endings, as this texture feels like a more definitive ending compared to that in measure 7.

*High-intensity structures, jump-cutting, and the second false ending*

The first of several high-intensity structures makes its way into the music beginning at measure 24. Favors introduces this structure by playing tambourine at a *mf* level, but then Moye and Jarman immediately take off and move into this intense zone with three loud conch shell sounds and intense conga drumming along with the events performed by the rest of the ensemble. Moye responds to Jarman’s punctuations in a highly spontaneous fashion. Although he plays the figures as written, he proceeds to do so elaboratively for as long as Jarman continues playing, bringing the music into a higher state of energy. This measure grows in intensity when Mitchell comes in strongly with his glockenspiel figure in the middle of that measure (along with Favors on balafon) followed by a frenetic, virtuosic bicycle horn improvisation performed by Jarman. Shortly thereafter, Mitchell, Ewart, and Moye shift us back into a quieter zone with gongs while the rest of the ensemble is performing as a resonant metallic sound group. Another extended duet between Braxton (back on garbage can machine) and Ewart (on bamboo table and chimes) takes place followed by a very loud unison texture that is repeated four times, with each iteration having a different shape. The Braxton-Ewart duo then returns, but in a more aggressive fashion. Here, Braxton is playing heavy bubbling sounds inside the garbage cans as Ewart is playing his set of fifteen hanging bells very loudly. They perform these contrasting textures in a way that competes with Jarman’s bike horn improvisation before settling down. We experience another “jump-cut” intensity structure that happens at measure 27 and continues to build until it arrives at a sudden ending that features a composed passage for Hubkaphone accompanied by vibes, tubular bells, and Ewart’s hanging bells. The slow, quiet entry of Moye’s gong mu-



sic sneaks in, giving the *feeling* that the piece has reached its conclusion. This is the second false ending. Beginning with Threadgill's Hubkaphone and garbage cans, the ensemble builds for one last time, leading to a very big crescendo that ends with Mitchell's five-note phrase on the dinner chimes. The LSB-WB combination finally begins at measure 30 as a concluding texture as the group plays a short coda featuring bell-like textures along with gongs to end the piece together.

## CONCLUSION

### *Legacy of "The Maze"*

Many years ago, I saw a picture of "The Maze" while flipping through pages in Lewis' book, and I became very curious about it. I've listened to this piece many times, and I continue to remain in complete awe of not just the music, but the courage and the determination to present such an ambitious work.

I mentioned earlier that "The Maze" was a work that was an expression of life experiences, a logical extension of the AACM and Art Ensemble of Chicago activities, and an affirmation of manifold performance practices taking place in creative Black communities up until the point of composition. Extending beyond these facts, it is a unique sound complex that, when examined carefully, recontextualizes the notion of simply being a musician into a performer of service and ritual who can draw on and experience the spirit of multiple traditions simultaneously. In Lincoln T. Beauchamp's book, *Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future*, Jarman observed that, during his time with the Art Ensemble of Chicago, the reason they used so many instruments in their concerts was because:

*They were looking for specific sounds to express the music that was flowing through their consciousness. [ . . . ] Also, there was another challenge—to investigate an infinite number of forms. We were not masters of every form, but we certainly had to at least be aware of these forms. [Don] Moya would teach us African rhythms with specific forms. When we worked on it and did it right, you could feel the spirit click in, you could feel the spiritual uplift of the universality of the music. Even if it was a Southeast Asian form, when we got to the right level of that, you could feel the spirit click in.*

Similar to the music of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, "The Maze" moves in and out of particular musical environments in a way that does not interfere with the ensemble's natural way of being. To date, there are only two concert performances of "The

Maze." Both took place in 1998 and feature the same personnel as the recording.

In hindsight, I conclude that every performance of the score would be entirely different (as Mitchell intended for it to be), because the general element that contributes to the piece's success is ALWAYS there, and that is the element of improvisation. Any given performance of "The Maze" will always serve to put experienced and inexperienced improvisers in a state of comfort—that is to say that, while there are composed elements, there also exists the possibility of functioning the way they normally do in an improvisational context. The musicians are creating spontaneously, yes. But they are not left wondering, "Well, what am I supposed to do?" The materials are there for them to play, but they can shape it in their own way. When the performers know exactly what they're doing in this composition, they are able to project the intent of the piece in a clear and confident manner. The late composer-conductor Butch Morris once exclaimed to me before a performance: "Don't just play the music on the page. Make it YOURS!" This performative ideal most certainly points to the way "The Maze" was skillfully executed by Mitchell's percussion ensemble.

At the same time, I do worry about one thing. Would "The Maze" be just as successful with other performers, given its community-like, "lived in" aesthetic? From a performance angle, my assumption would be yes. But in another sense, I also wonder if it might prove difficult for any given performance of the piece to maintain its sonic identity. Could we identify a completely different performance of "The Maze" on "traditional" percussion instruments and other found objects that are not as specific to different performers?

In my view, a successful realization of the work may require the percussionists to build new instruments. And it may involve the integration of found objects and other foreign elements into their setups that are unique to who they are. (This is something I've been long interested in doing.) We would need to build our own Hubkaphones or find good, resonant garbage cans, hackbretts, zithers, and many other kinds of instruments and objects before we could even begin to perform a work like this while maintaining its sonic and structural integrity. On the logistical side of the equation, it might be very difficult to host a performance of the piece, given where things are economically at the present time. Because of its massive setup (each station takes hours to assemble), I think that it would warrant an extended rendition of "The Maze." It would take lots of planning and work to realize this composition to its fullest potential.



# TOUCHES OF COLOR

A conversation between John Corbett  
and Roscoe Mitchell

JC How have two-and-a-half years of Covid impacted your art making?

RM I remember quite some time ago, at some point, I thought oh, wait a minute now, you're going to have to *learn* something about this. So at that moment I put the painting down and concentrated on writing music. But now I'm back to that spot again where I really enjoy it. I wake up anxious to get out into the sunroom to start working. That's why I think I'm able to produce the amount of work I'm doing now.

JC That feeling that you needed to know more about what you were doing in painting, when was that?

RM I still took some paintings with me to Europe in 1969 when the Art Ensemble went there, and I worked on them there. But I'm not feeling intimidated anymore. I'm just really enjoying it.

JC That came about in part because of the forced isolation, not being on the road?

RM That's part of it. I used this whole period to learn. Wendy's [Mitchell's partner] become an engineer, too; she was always a videographer, but she's expanded what she's doing. We're both taking advantage of this time. We instinctively know that when things get better, the people that are gonna move forward are the ones who have done the work. People will be looking for things to be inspired by.

JC How does a typical day work for you, in terms of schedule? How does painting and drawing dovetail with practicing and writing music?

RM I'm a creature of habit. I've got a routine. Four o'clock in the morning I'm usually watching CBS News with Norah O'Donnell. I know that five o'clock and the sun's getting ready to hit. So I get up and do that, paint, you know. Eventually Wendy will come downstairs. We have breakfast together and then go for a walk, get some exercise, and come back and paint some more. I have started to bring back writing music, because I have a piece to write for Thomas Buckner in this next three-song series with lyrics by Bob Kaufmann, so I'm working on that for voice and piano. What I do is I try to put out the things that keep me connected, and then I just sit back and watch them unfold. Like when you came along, man, I'm thinking, whew, man, having an exhibition! You're part of it, too.

JC I'm curious about that daily practice thing. Having a routine, moving back and forth between writing and painting. Writing music seems like a deadline-oriented practice; painting seems like a more open-ended practice. Then there's practice. And I know you have to keep on top of your instruments.

RM Oh absolutely. What I'm doing is singling out the bass saxophone. I can't seem to get it out of my hands. When I listen to my previous recorded music on alto, I've got significant work out there on that instrument. Darius Jones, the alto saxophonist, we connected, and he said he wanted to learn my piece "Nonaah." And then that's what he did. At the Other Minds festival, if I shut my eyes, I thought it was me playing it, he's that meticulous. So I'm gonna let him have that and I'm gonna hit with the bass saxophone and these lower instruments. That's my goal, it's a big goal, it's a bigger horn, you gotta get the muscles. I've plenty of work to do! I don't have extra time to goof around. I've been going through some of the older rock 'n' roll songs [sings]: *They call me daddy/Daddy rollin'/They call me daddy/Daddy rollin'/Daddy rollin' stone*. That kind of stuff. There's no lack of stuff to work on. And I have to stay in stuff for a long time. I'm working on faster ways to memorize things. Some exercises I've written out, but I'm also oral-traditioning. Learning things that way. It's great! I've still got a lot of work to do.

JC The contributions you've made to alto and soprano saxophone, in particular—you could stop playing right now and the contribution is so vast. I was thinking about bass saxophone when you let me know how deeply into it you are now; those low instruments have always been part of your fascination. Like "You Wastin' My Time," that final solo, which is unbelievable.

RM That was Gerald Oshita playing contrabass sarrusophone, which is in the octave range of contrabass saxophone. I told Gerald: "At the end of this I want you to scare some kids!"

JC Exploring the entire sonic range of the instrumentarium is part of your life's work, it seems to me. And then also there really isn't a figure totally associated with bass saxophone. You think of some older players, like Adrian Rollini...

RM Yes, that's right.

JC ... and there are people who play bass saxophone, but it's usually something you go to for an unusual color, so that idea of getting really deep into that particular horn is such an interesting decision. It's a good bridge, from a formal standpoint, from your music to your painting. I remember seeing you play a concert in which you played a single note on each of many different instruments, one instrument at a time, one sound at a time, changing instruments each time. Every note was a different timbre. I was thinking a lot at the time about this idea of tone color, of using fragments of tone color. When I see the new paintings you're making,

I think of both the use of fragmentation, because you're breaking things up, and reveling in extremes of color, the joy of color. Do you see this direct correlation between music and painting?

RM Yeah, very direct connection. I'm developing the painting the same way I develop my music. I develop a composition that way—development is the main factor that hooks them together. I'm getting back on the other instruments; I'm anxious to get back on the tenor, too! But that's the connection for me. The strategy works. The touches of color going from instrument to instrument, that was my composition "L-R-G," made for Wadada [Leo Smith] and George Lewis. And it does that. On my solo record I've got pieces like "Little Big Horn," things like that. You play one note on one instrument and another note on another instrument, it's a whole different approach to acoustics. But I hear music that way. I might hear one note on the bass saxophone and another note on a bell. In terms of the sound palette, I want to keep that going as well.

JC Instrumental palette is such a good term. The Art Ensemble was a pioneer in terms of putting the question of instrumentation in the foreground. In a conventional 1920s/1930s big band context, more or less everyone doubled. You had to have access to all sorts of colors. An orchestral range without an orchestra, so people needed to play lots of different instruments. What I always thought was so brilliant with the Art Ensemble was to make it even much broader, to take that idea and make the instrumentation much more open—tables of little instruments, moving between instruments for you guys. A more radical questioning of the roles of the players and their instruments. All of that comes back to the idea of expansion. More tools, more sounds, more colors. Now in creative music everyone has to be aware of that, nobody's looked back, but it was a huge move at the time. That feels like a direct parallel with your visual work. And maybe the percussion set-ups are this nice place between the musical version of it—you can reach for very disparate sounds very quickly—and they're visual, they have a sculptural presence. They feel right between the painting and the music in terms of the diversity of possible colors.

RM Uh huh, yes.

JC How did you get started with visual art?

RM I was very young. My Uncle Arthur, he made a lot of my toys, carved them. And then my Uncle Charles Commodore Carter, my god, he moved out of our house and moved in with Reverend Hall, his church, and when he died no one knows what happened to those

books that he had. He would use crayon and pen-and-ink, and he would layer the crayon, and he had a protractor. They were beautiful. Books of myself and my sisters and our friends, and we were these people from outer space. Like comic books. If those books would show up, I keep putting it out there. The art side came from my mother's side of the family, music came from my father's side of the family. My older brother, Norman, my dad's son, he came to live with us in Milwaukee, and he sat me down and he played me 78 records from his collection, they called them "killers." He knew [saxophonist] Nicky Hill and all these people.

JC Muhal?

RM I met Muhal [Richard Abrams] when I came back from the Army. Muhal was rehearsing at the C & C Lounge on 64th and Cottage Grove every Monday night. I showed up and everyone welcomed me with open arms, Muhal encouraged you to write music; he said put down some of those things you're playing on the horn. He said when you start something, finish it! You were allowed to bring in your music, take it home, change it. Muhal, man, he was a prolific composer. He had a thing called "Fats," stride piano thing for the band. He had a piece [whistles the melody to himself], but more than that. I was in college. After college I'd go to Muhal's house. He'd show me stuff, other people would come by. Later in life, when we weren't all in Chicago, when Muhal and I got together we'd just pick up where we left off. Always studying stuff. At that time I was carrying around a sketch pad, always drawing. We'd go to different exhibitions at the Art Institute. I remember the Ivan Albright exhibition there. Muhal was raving about the fact that he'd taken ten years to do this painting, and you could see it, he'd paint right past the people, their skin. I'd be in New York, we'd go to different art museums together.



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JC You went to exhibitions together with some regularity.

RM Oh absolutely. Muhal was always interested in going out to things, taking them in.

JC Did you guys go to the Field Museum [of Natural History] together much?

RM We didn't go to the Field Museum much. I started to go there a few times. Growing up in Chicago, it was mostly the Museum of Science and Industry, because the schools would load us into buses, and we'd be there the whole day with a packed lunch and all that. I liked that museum because they have a lot of hands-on stuff you can do there.

JC I want to ask you more about that relationship with Muhal, because he was also a painter. When do you remember learning that he was a painter in addition to being a musician and composer?

RM Muhal was always doing that. He painted that picture of Monk when Monk was on the cover of *Time* magazine. And I remember he painted this Coke bottle and a piece of bread, and he was talking about painting glass. He gave me a painting that's in the kitchen—any way you hang it, it's happening, man!

JC Did you talk a lot about art?

RM We talked about it. He was turning me on to a lot of painters. Van Gogh, lots of people.

JC Did you know about the Africobra artists?

RM I know about them now, but I learned about them later. In the '60s, it wasn't a strange thing. AACM concerts, you could hang your art at those events.

JC Did you do that?

RM Yes. I might have done that at the concert with Claudine Myers and Ajaramu—we did a Duke Ellington concert—I might have hung a painting for that.

JC In the '60s.

RM Right.

JC Did Muhal sometimes have paintings at concerts?

RM Yeah, he would bring them out.

JC Later there was the idea of banners, and in the Art Ensemble, it's almost like the band became a painting. And you were distinctively the one who wasn't painted.

RM Yeah, me and Lester. Lester didn't either.

JC That's interesting, the theatrical element of what you were doing included costumes and face painting. I'm thinking about the way that this notion of having paintings at your concerts in a way becomes unified with the band as a whole package, not separate parts of a package.

RM That's true.



JC That multidisciplinary aspect of the early AACM presentations is so interesting.

RM We carried our banner around with us at all our concerts. We set an agenda in Europe. We had a bus company; we could roll twenty-four hours if we needed to.

JC When you first got there you had the VW bus, right?

RM Yes, the VW bus and two motorcycles.

JC You brought some paintings over to Europe tucked away in the bus, to work on them over there.

RM Yeah, we took a boat over. After that we started flying. We had all kinds of wardrobe cases for our wardrobe. We had a great rider with everybody's diet on it, some guys were ordering champagne. We had our home away from home on the bus.

JC Let's go back to the toys your uncle made for you. That cat sculpture you made, it's closely related to what he did, right?

RM Yes, how that came together was we were in California, and they came to cut down some trees. I picked up some wood; started to pick up stones in my yard that resembled teeth; Wendy got into finding stuff; and in California there's so much stuff you can find.

JC Do you see it as directly related to what your uncle made for you?

RM Well, he mostly carved things. My statue is a configuration of things.

JC Describe the inspiration your uncle had on you.

RM He'd be drawing and he'd get us to draw along, Uncle Charles.

JC A lot of encouragement from your family.

RM I grew up in Chicago, man. The snow was so clean, people would put a bucket out and make ice cream. All kinds of fresh vegetable markets on 70-something and State Street. During the summer I would work with the vegetable man. We'd go in the alley, one side up to 12th Street, cross the street and come back down the other side. People depended on that kind of thing. We were selling vegetables. The ice box man. The rag man. All of these—you could go onto your back porch and just wait. Young people have never had that experience. I remember when TV came in. Buster, the father of some friends, was the first to have a TV; we'd go to the beach with him, rabbit hunting. We'd stop over there and watch *Howdy Doody*. As a family we had certain radio shows we'd listen to: *Let's Pretend*, *The Shadow*, all these different shows. It was much more communication, where people actually did teach you about things that had the value of common sense.

JC That's such a beautiful portrait of your home life growing up. When you went into the Army, were you think-



ing about art making? The first painting is from 1963, which is not long after you came back, right?

RM Yeah, that would be then, that's right. In the Army I was focusing on music. There was a student that was graduating that was a baritone saxophonist. So the band instructor asked if I wanted to play it. So I started on the baritone. I was playing the clarinet in the band, but back then people said if you wanted to play saxophone you had to start on the clarinet. But I always like the saxophone. I'm gonna pull out my clarinet now, too. I have been thinking about the configuration of my horns for travel. I have an E-flat clarinet. Also have Jarman's bass clarinet.

JC I'd love to hear you play bass clarinet.

RM I had a bass clarinet a long time ago, but the one Jarman had has low-C. I'll pull it out and put it on the stand.

JC There's that tradition of people who double on alto and bass clarinet, Dolphy of course.

RM Oh yeah.

JC The Army situation—you come out you made a bunch of paintings in the mid-1960s. Like the one with a wrench in it.

RM At first I called it "Somebody Threw a Wrench Into It," but later it has been called "Drum Rise." That was my experimenting with putting raised things on the canvas. What's up under there is brown rice. That's why I'm curious now about the palette knife. I'm using it on paintings now, in combination with white putty stuff to build up under the paint.



JC Did you know about the Imagists, who were making a splash right at the same time as those paintings, down in Hyde Park starting in 1966?

RM I didn't. I lived in Hyde Park, on Dorchester, before going to Europe. But I didn't know about them.

JC That's interesting to me. The Imagist work has some superficial connections to what you were doing. They're interested in high-key color. They're abstract, but abstract by way of the figure, like much of your work. Some iconic records have your paintings on them. Like for instance Lester Bowie's *Numbers 1 & 2*. I think that was the first?

RM Yes, that was the first.

JC How did that come about?

RM Nessa Records put the recording out. Deborah, Lester's wife, owns that painting now.

JC Did you give that painting to Lester?

RM Yes I did.

JC And he said he wanted to use it on the cover?

RM That's a good question. I think we decided to use it on the cover. We both decided together; it seemed to be appropriate for that.

JC It's a very striking cover image. And it was the first time I saw a painting of yours. In some ways records are incredible vehicles for the spreading of imagery.

RM That was our first recording with Jarman, so that was where he started to come into the Art Ensemble. He had some unfortunate things happen with his quartet. [Pianist] Christopher Gaddy had kidney trouble, he passed away. And Charles Clark, the genius bassist, was talking to his wife Marianne, and had a brain aneurysm. So we asked Joseph if he wanted to join us.

JC He had had a period of being mute, too.

RM Yeah, he was pretty much devastated about losing his two bandmembers.

JC That must have been quite a blow. The next record that I think of with an image of yours is *The Third Decade*. Was that your choice?

RM We decided that. [Famadou Don] Moye had put the frame on it, and ECM wanted to use it.

JC In terms of the interplay between visual art and creative music, I was also thinking about the *Wall of Respect*. Because if I'm not mistaken the Art Ensemble played in front of the *Wall of Respect* when it was unveiled in 1967.

RM I think that was Lester, Malachi, and myself. That's the year that Lester Bowie's *Numbers 1 & 2* got recorded. Joseph might not have been in the band yet.

JC I was thinking about mural painting, public art making. Did you know about any of the painters who worked on the *Wall of Respect*?

RM I met them much later, when I was teaching a class and they were invited to participate.

JC Another connection between the visual art world and your music has to do with the artist Christopher Wool, whose father Ira was a biochemist at University of Chicago, and Terry Martin worked for him running his lab. Terry called Ira one day and told him that he needed to see the Art Ensemble at the Abraham Lincoln Center. Christopher said it was a profoundly important event for him. He said there was a traffic light that would switch between red and green. And there were tables of instruments and costumes.

RM Was that the concert with Julius Hemphill?

JC I don't know about that concert.

RM Well on the concert with Hemphill, we had a mask of Colonel Sanders. And Julius was playing that chicken song [sings] and parading around the stage. Eventually he got pied, a whipped cream pie. That was at Abraham Lincoln Center.

JC Julius was heavily into the theatrical side.

RM Yeah, absolutely. He was a founding member of BAG [Black Artists Group] down in St. Louis. Great, great musician.

JC Was that a fairly early use of costumes for you guys?

RM We did all sorts of things. When folks from Britain came over to do the documentary on us, we had costumes.

JC On *Message to Our Folks* you're all in costume—you have a knife . . .

RM Lester has a gun . . .

JC . . . Malachi has a hoe, I think.

RM That's right.

JC That's like costumes like in a play, as opposed to on-stage, with the face paint, which feels more like inhabiting a whole African-centric set of identities. You also embody an artwork when you wear clothing painted by Dennis Nechvatal. How did you meet Dennis?

RM I met him through Patrick Flynn, who's a photographer here in Madison. We made these videos. The one guy who's missing in action is Steve Sylvester, an inventor. He had bat houses to take care of mosquitoes. I have to show you some of these videos. He wanted to build an instrument that would play itself.

JC He made those bicycle-propelled instruments?

RM Yeah, that's him. All of those videos we made.

JC You were wearing Dennis' outfits and playing along with Steve's instruments?

RM And Dennis was painting live. Yeah.

JC It's important to understand your work as a visual artist in a broader field, that it's always in relation to other things, other contexts, other painters, other collaborators. Like when you perform with other people. And at the same time, you have the solitary practice, the morning routine, which is maybe more closely aligned with the activity of composing music, in a more isolated context. From the early years, like the fact that you would have paintings at a musical performance, that might seem natural to you to do, but it's pretty extraordinary. It suggests that you're already thinking about things in this totally intermedia way at that point, and it only gets more and more developed as you go along.

RM That's right.

JC Those Sylvester instruments were incredible.

RM Nobody's doing that kind of stuff.

JC Can we talk a little about the figures in your paintings. To what extent are they specific individuals, specific characters?

RM Some of the characters, I bring them back. I may have several characters in one painting. Or I take them and use them in another painting.



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JC Do they come from people you've known, or are they invented?

RM I just invent them. I'm getting more trusting of myself. Right now I'm working with these squares, making them different sizes, which animates them. I don't throw away anything. I exhaust what I'm working with.

JC Creative reuse.

RM Right, that's right.

JC One painting was inspired by a mosaic on a floor in California, you told me. And I've seen that motif run through a number of the paintings, and it has an optical quality, which allows you to get vibrations going, and you move it around and distort it and playing with it, much the way I hear you doing with your music. I was always interested in the distinction between having a Sound Ensemble and a Space Ensemble. I wonder if those two logics might have some relationship to the paintings too. Like one might be more to do with stasis, a static quality. And the other to do with motion, kineticism.

RM I do things separately with those two groups, and then I combine them. On some records both ensembles are there.

JC So they're separate but you can modularly move them in and out of one another. That seems like a very good description of what's going on in a lot of the visual work, that play between stasis and motion, between abstraction and figuration.

RM These long-standing working groups are vital, because what you learn today will influence what you do the next year. I will isolate things, like with the paintings, and develop them, refine them. Development is the thing I really like. Having the ability to put the time into studying all these elements like that. If I can wake up and learn something in a day, I'm doing fine. I lose myself in the sunroom. I've got several paintings going. I've got some large canvases and I'm fascinated by the 16 x 20 size too.

JC Refinement and development is central to your approach.

RM I stay with these compositions for a long time. If you needed an arrangement of "Nonaah" in a week, could I do it? Yeah, I could do it because it's a refined method. And just the first writing of it as a solo piece, there was so much stuff in it, and it was well defined. That was one time I was just able to sit down and write it. I had moved into the country in Bath, Michigan. I wanted to move out of the city. Some people, like Muhal, can get mounds and mounds of work done in the city. But that was the period that "Nonaah" came from, and "S II Examples." The country was good for that.

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# ROSCOE MITCHELL AT MILLS COLLEGE: JOHN IVERS

Zeena Parkins

Mills and Roscoe are two forces that acted on each other.

Jl A one-minute rundown on my pre-Mills background and how I met Roscoe:

I was at Marlboro College, where I studied music in a more conservatory-like atmosphere. We had three semesters of counterpoint, three semesters of orchestration, a lot of theory, classical composition, hard notation. I wrote papers about timing and structure and form and listening. There's a time and a place for that, but I was seeking more.

At Marlboro there was strong collaboration between programs, and I was learning physical theater and contact improvisation. I started exploring different creative practices. Some students were doing capstone projects with process-oriented works for body and movement inspired by Deborah Hay. We would meet daily to meditate, improvise, and develop works for months as part of the score. I also regularly began improvising for dance classes. My last year at Marlboro I went to see Pauline Oliveros at Amherst. It was a great show, and I got to talk to her afterwards. We had done some scores of hers, and she was like, "You should go to Mills."

When I got to Mills you [Zeena] got me back playing clarinet which became a big part of my life. I hadn't touched the clarinet in a decade. And I jumped into this orchestration masterclass with Roscoe. I had been making money working as an arranger and orchestrator for Bollywood singers. I was really into soft music then, a lot of light-touch harmonics, barely audible; soft and airy was the vibe I was going for. Roscoe heard what I was doing in class during the first semester's string quartet reading, and asked me if I could work on his piece, *Distant Radio Transmission*. It was already partially transcribed.

ZP You eventually wrote about Roscoe and your experiences working with him in your thesis paper. That is why it was so important for me to talk to you in particular. I remember the discussion regarding hybrid practice ... actually, no one else uses that term. Where does it come from?

Jl I made it up actually. The point about Roscoe's work, in hybrid practices, is there's all these nodes of feedback happening. He might listen to it and re-compose it and then re-improvise over it, or hear something from somebody else and ask us to recreate it. It's a complicated network of input versus output. His whole creative process is about that network and those connections. A lot of the orchestrations are transcriptions of improvised works, and then they get re-composed with many people in a really complicated way.



ZP From an educational point of view, I was really struck by Roscoe trusting the students. Making a transcription of an improvisation is in essence creating something new. It's unusual how Roscoe made himself available and permitted this kind of intense lively exchange.

JI It was very much that way. I had a unique experience that I am very grateful for.

I think Roscoe trusted my vision of the landscape generally. I was really in deep, active engagement and knowledge sharing.

ZP One could argue that it's impossible to transcribe an improvisation.

JI The impossibility of it seemed explicit at the beginning. I was into these sounds—like the air or two minutes of just playing on the bridge—and he was into the fact that I was exploring this sonic world that he was hearing in his saxophone. I listened to it on repeat for maybe twelve hours and asked myself: “What are the air sounds like? How does the instrument, that sopranino saxophone, vibrate with wind and spit?”

ZP Sounds that might be considered non-musical sounds, the sounds you might take out if you're making a recording, because they're not pure.

JI Yeah, exactly. Working on the piece was all in metaphor. It's part of his whole sound world in that piece. His mastery of breath and the physicality of the instrument was very interesting to me. The drum and piano transcription was completed with some of the pitches for the saxophone mapped out. I had the recording, and I listened to it in terms of what are the abstractions of the structure which are based around exploring these sound worlds, like, this might be an A section, right? Or this might be a B. Or Roscoe has it this way. He has big cadences in his playing; he hits something and just stops everyone, or he'll tell them to stop. I would notate what pitches I could from the saxophone using some tools for analyzing the sound, and attempted to represent them literally or metaphorically in the strings. The transcription and orchestration were tightly coupled.

ZP I was just going to ask if you used software to analyze sounds or noises and see where the frequencies were.

JI I did not do any auto transcription, which is a method that's been used in other pieces for Roscoe. It works pretty good for some of those things, but I'm deciding what to take, especially in the pitches, so everything in terms of the pitch and rhythm is by ear. Timbrally, I wanted to analyze it digitally, but I feel like it needed a human touch with the musical things that were happening.

ZP Were you just working on transcribing his horn, or were you doing the entire trio?

JI I only transcribed the horn but used parts of the percussion and electronics in arranging the strings. We would reuse ideas between parts while orchestrating, and things naturally evolved and change. It's complicated, actually. I think the unique part was that—right when he asked me to do this—his career really blew up. All of a sudden, he went from [writing for] a scrappy Mills orchestra to some of the best orchestras doing new music in the world. So he needed help, and he would call me at six in the morning: “Can we meet up?” I'm a morning person—I would drive over there, and I'd sit with him in his little office in his house at Mills. I think the longest I was there was fourteen hours.

ZP What?! What were you doing together? Would you present your work and he would give feedback, or you would actually talk about particular moments, like “What about this gurgle or breath?”

JI I would talk about what I did in a broad sense, and then we would listen. I felt like I was participating in the composition, because, in some sections, Roscoe gave me a lot of creative space. The process of notating the piece for orchestra was highly active, the piece was never really done. We would grab things from the keys or the percussion and add them to the winds, lengthen sections, add a coda or add new sections for improvisers. This is part of Roscoe's practice. For example, he invites James [Fei] to play because what James will do with electronics is going to work great. He's inviting a creative voice to contribute. That then becomes part of the composition as it evolves via transcriptions, edits, re-orchestrations.

The original intro was about twelve minutes and the final version was thirty-five minutes. The New York version is twenty minutes, and then the Bologna version, twenty-five minutes. After hearing a performance he might say, “I just want to improv here, or we'll do brass. Any strings that you think would sound good here?” For the Thomas Buckner improv section, it started as a much shorter moment of music in the original that we liked the sound world of, so we lengthened it and explored different string timbres based on Buckner's vocal style.

I sat in his little office, and we worked through things together. I'm also helping him with *Finale*, and there's all sorts of stuff happening: I'm playing with his dog, looking at our computers, listening to music. We were really close during the process. We would both have our *Finale* files open, and sometimes we would sit there in silence for an hour while we're both working.

It was almost co-working, then, “update: Oh, check this out.” We'd listen to it in *Finale*—Roscoe loved *Finale* playback—and we'd jam on it. And then he'd say, “Hey, look at this thing Anthony



Braxton sent me,” and we would watch some YouTube videos. Or I’d show him pieces, sometimes my own compositions or recordings, sometimes things I was really into. I would say, “Check out the Kaajia Saariaho piece, how she does the strings here.” And he’d be like, “Yeah, let’s try it.”

ZP Saariaho’s has that very simple and direct way of showing the amount of pressure with those dark triangles that she makes in her scores. It’s very clear.

JI That’s exactly what I was exploring in some of my string works at the time. I love the *Sept Papillons* for solo cello. So, we would talk and share stuff we were into. I might share a new book I found on notation techniques, or he would show me some obscure sheet of multiphonic fingerings for bassoon someone sent him. We might do long tones. Sometimes he called and we’d just do *Top Tones on Saxophone*, or we’d sight read through Beethoven string quartet parts on bass clarinet. Then we’d have a snack, and he’d be like, “Let’s start writing music.”

Honestly, it was great. That’s his style, all together, but it felt like that informed a lot of the *Distant Radio Transmission* work.

ZP So, when he’s growing the piece, is he adding improvisers to do solos and then he’s putting pads or something underneath them? Or is he getting another improvisation that is done and transcribing that and adding that?

JI That’s a great question with a few variables. For some reason he was really into this *Distant Radio Transmission* piece. It was just this grand thing that he was very focused on.

ZP Something about it grabbed him.

JI Yeah, the ball was rolling. The first version was actually for the Angelica Festival in Bologna.

ZP That was the first time you heard it?

JI No. What happened was Petr Kotik called Roscoe and wanted to do this big AACM thing.

He wanted to do *Distant Radio Transmission*. It was before the original premiere, so we took this huge orchestra piece and we condensed it down. And this was the fourteen-hour session. I was reading from the Angelica score: bassoon to measure 13; two oboe, two octaves up; remove the last beat. I read through the old score, and Roscoe entered everything into Finale in a lone giant arrangement session to get this smaller version.

And Tom Buckner came in on that. We got recordings and Roscoe began thinking about how Tom can perform with this other composition happening. He found moments that he liked, or something that worked or, “Oh, this air sound with Tom Buckner was nice. Let’s make it longer.”

ZP So, you learned a lot from the Petr Kotik—the smaller

live version—and that informed the version that you were getting ready to do.

JI Yeah. Based on that feedback, we started editing the new version. We added a coda where everybody improvises together, but at SEM, Roscoe thought James Ilgenfritz should play a solo there. So, invariably, now there’s a bass solo, and James gets brought on for sequential performances. So it lives in the moment.

Roscoe features people whose sound he likes, and who he can trust in a performance. I think some people feel excluded. It happens, you know; he might bring you in or tell you to stop playing—this is not working; can we finesse this? Or do you want to finesse this?

But he’s always honest about his work.

ZP What was it like to actually hear that first rehearsal in Bologna?

JI I’m gonna be honest, the first two rehearsals were painful for me. It’s an uncomfortable piece, but one part of the discomfort was that it was being played by this giant opera orchestra, and they’re looking for this exactitude, even in notation. They want to know everything, and Roscoe actually leaves a lot of agency in his scores. You’ve got to figure it out. For example, the dynamics might naturally evolve or have more wiggle room than a traditional orchestra piece. You might need to sense when to play out or when to really make an accent growl; it demands a different thing from the performers.

ZP A different engagement.

JI And also, a friction is built into the institution schemas, in that orchestra players in these top level orchestras might not really play out in rehearsal; they might be kind of memorizing the music or fixing the sections. They’re on their own trip, because they know they can show up and play. And because it’s all written in this right way, they can play it perfectly. But Roscoe has this need to hear what it’s gonna sound like in rehearsal. He has very high expectations for that engagement in rehearsal, even though he sometimes seems like he’s asleep, you know. It’s funny. He’s full of contradictions.

ZP So, the first couple of times, hearing the piece was frustrating, because the players were maybe phoning it in a little bit, because all the information wasn’t there?

JI I think that piece was also finding its footing. And it was a big thing for me. I’m so emotionally attached to this piece, and I wanted it to sound good.

ZP Was Roscoe improvising?

JI *Distant Radio Transmission* is one of the few orchestral pieces that he is the improviser on. A lot of orchestras want Ros-

coe to play with them. They want to do an orchestral piece, but they want Roscoe to play saxophone on it. And sometimes Roscoe just wants to write an orchestral piece. But *Distant Radio Transmission* was explicitly for Roscoe to improvise on with Tom Buckner, from the beginning.

After Roscoe started playing, I loved seeing the face of the orchestra in Bologna . . . Like, “Is he joking?” Then, he did another performance with an organ, and it just blew everyone’s mind. After rehearsing, after hearing Roscoe play, the orchestra begins to get it. There’s some nonverbal communication that happens, because if you know his work or you know him or you hear him play, it all starts to come together. The SEM performance—which came first—was uncomfortable because it was first orchestrated for a different sized ensemble. It was such a rush to get it ready, but we really honed it in there.

ZP And he played on that as well

Jl He played on that as well, he and Tom. That was a great concert, and, listening to it, we learned some stuff. For instance, the beginning had this long bass thing James Ilgenfritz did. It was beautiful—all these overtones—and it sounded really electronic, so Roscoe got James Fei in on it. Then we had James, who has an opening improv, and added another interlude section.

Later, Petr Kotik programed it at Ostrava Days Festival and I think it’s the best version of *Distant Radio Transmission*. Ostrava is where it solidified into its current form. It found itself. We had the best players from SEM and the New York scene. Then the orchestra gets filled out with a lot of the best students in European conservatories, who come for this festival experience. We had the big orchestra, like Bologna, but with new music players. And Petr is a good conductor of Roscoe’s work in many ways.

ZP . . . the decisions he makes about tempos and stuff like that?

Jl Oh, yeah. “Let’s cut this. Let’s change the tempo here. Let this fermata be longer . . .” He gets right in there. It’s not a light touch. And I think it worked in this case, because that orchestra really trusts him. Roscoe really trusts him. And he’s done a lot of amazing work with these AACM pieces.

ZP So, this final version ended up having very specific written material, but also a whole system of improvisers?

Jl Exactly. [The improvising is] built into the score and the cueing. We ended up with three primary performers which would be James, Tom, and Roscoe. Each have their own section and some group improv sections. And there are sections we knew from doing it so much that you can add people here in the moment. There’s a layer of implicit modularity, so we would know who would fit in

nicely for some of the improv sections, and that would change from performance to performance based on who was around. But we couldn’t do the piece without James, Tom, or Roscoe. It wouldn’t be the same piece.

ZP In the earlier versions, did you and Roscoe make decisions with orchestration that had to be corrected? This worked; this didn’t work; let’s keep this; let’s get rid of this . . .

Jl I would sit there with a score and make notes in real time in these early rehearsals. I actually have the scores from each performance. I kept them, the big scores with all the markings we had on them. After the rehearsals, we would come back, listen to the recordings, and make updates to the score for the next version.

I learned so much. I learned more than any other musical experience about how to practice and how to work. It was a good experience for me, just to see it evolve. And it’s still evolving in some ways.

ZP When was it actually recorded?

Jl I think it’s on three or four albums now, actually. The Ostrava version got released. I think the SEM version got released, and there are two Mills versions that have been released.

ZP So, it changes so much that it’s worth recording and releasing different versions of the piece, because it’s transforming in such a profound way.

Jl That’s in my thesis. I talked about that, using “Nonaah” as an example. That piece exists in so many different spheres and albums and performances and orchestrations and arrangements that are all different. Roscoe really makes a point of asking: “What is the work?” It can’t exist on one album. Releases are really just documentation.

ZP So, you had graduated in the middle of this process, right? You went from being his student to engaging in this really different kind of relationship. Obviously, you’re learning a lot from him, but he was learning from you too. I mean, you were having a really rich interchange of sensibilities and knowledge.

Jl I think we’re both lifelong learners in some sense. He’ll get some new book, and he’ll want to share it. Or I’ll do the same thing with a pdf of contrabassoon multiphonics, and he’ll print it out and put it in his archive. So, it was fun to explore within his experience, he didn’t have as much orchestral experience, actually, so a lot of stuff was new for him, like ranges of instruments. I’m sure it was a lot for him to come in as a master in his domain, but he’s always trying something new.

And then, towards the end, it really was a lot of woodwind work. That was a big part of our language, just playing. It seems

really natural that we would actually just play together or listen to improvisations.

ZP Would they always be his improvisations?

Jl No, I would bring stuff I'm working on too, and he would show me things other students had brought in. He was like, "Check out this thing Nathan Corder made with a nail on his guitar.<sup>2</sup> Look at this contrabass solo." Playing feels like a sacred space for Roscoe. He wants to do scales, exercises, different challenges. He sat down and taught me how to circular breathe. He worked with me getting our instruments repaired, we would go to the shop together. I think we bonded over woodwind playing.

ZP And then did you improvise together?

Jl We did not improvise together.

ZP Why do you think that was?

Jl It was already a little complicated. It was a great experience to be in this world with Roscoe, but I also needed to get out of the nest a little bit. I wasn't there yet. He helped me get there.

ZP Do you feel it was a collaboration ultimately? Is there even a name for it?

Jl It's like trying to understand copyright in the age of artificial intelligence, something's going to break. To be honest, my take on the transcription was aggressively non-exact, probably more so than some of the other composers. And it was more of a translation than a transcription. I felt licensed to push the boundaries. And Roscoe encouraged it if he liked how it sounded. This is part of the vision as it unfolds.

ZP What do you take with you now as you move forward with your work ?

Jl I think it's the hybrid practice approach and feedback systems. There are individual actors and nodes of information, processes that connect to other ones in really complicated ways. It's about the feedback of each node into the overall ecosystem. Composing in ecosystems, as humans, is really interesting.

1 John Ivers is a musician, educator, and technologist who creates interactive and meaningful experiences exploring the intersection of physical and digital mediums.

2 Nathan Corder is an Oakland-based composer of works for electronics, objects, and arrays of people. He received his MFA from Mills in 2018.

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# THERE'S SO MUCH TO LEARN IN MUSIC

James Fei

One of my most vivid early encounters with Roscoe's music took place in my car. I tuned the radio to WKCR as I was driving out of New York, and what came through the speakers was so hypnotic and beguiling that I had to pull over to finish listening to it. *What is this!?* A nine-note passage was repeated, again and again, with wide leaps and shifting rhythm that was articulated with slight variations; it was static yet constantly changing. And that *sound!* The alto saxophonist clearly had great technical command, but it sounded as if he was deliberately approaching the instrument in a way that forced him to confront it—each high-E that begins the phrase burst through in a different manner (more on this later). I had to wait until the DJ announcement afterwards to find out what I was listening to, but the recording turned out to be the solo version of Roscoe's "Nonaah" taped live in Willisau in 1976, released on a double album of the same name on Nessa Records.

The circumstances of the recording are legendary—Anthony Braxton could not make his solo concert in Willisau and the organizers had asked Roscoe, who had just performed there with the Art Ensemble of Chicago, to do the concert instead. The crowd was unruly, and increasingly so when confronted with the unwavering repetition. Even through the recording, the tension is palpable. In the liner notes, Roscoe notes that "the music couldn't move till they respected me, until they realized that I wasn't going anywhere, and if someone was going it would have had to be them . . . and it helped to create the environment the piece was to take place in . . . building tensions . . . and when I finally did release it my alto had just given in to me (it said, 'OK, you can play me now')." This arc takes place over twenty minutes, and the "release" is exhilarating.

I immediately set out to find a copy of *Nonaah* (not a trivial task twenty-five years ago, the double record was already long out of print). When I finally did, I studied everything about it closely. The cover photo of Roscoe with his foot propped up on a cafe table towards the viewer is both casual and confrontational. There were score fragments in the inner cover. Much to my delight, it also included a version of "Nonaah" for four alto saxophones. At that moment I happened to be working on a series of pieces for this particular instrumentation, and here was this masterpiece that I was not aware of. Expanded from the nine-note figure in the solo version, the quartet "Nonaah" configured the altos in complex rhythmic relationships—stacked, hocketing, and dovetailing. Sometimes the four voices generated compound patterns that were too dense to parse, but are perceived as an aggregate (e.g. the opening and the ending quick section). At other times they form a single line that is



fragmented between different voices. While the DNA from the solo version is easily recognizable, the quartet version is very much its own beast. Over the next forty-plus years, Roscoe would continue to mine the implications germinated by that solo piece, reworking it into a cello quartet; a trio for flute, oboe, and piano; bass saxophone quartet; and an orchestral work among others.

When Mills College presented a portrait concert of Roscoe in 2012 including chamber and orchestra works, I had the opportunity to pay tribute to this piece that was so influential to me, performing “Nonaah” with my alto quartet. Characteristically, Roscoe made a new revision for the performance. It was both thrilling and nerve wracking to learn the piece, not just because it was difficult, but because it is so iconic to us and we didn’t want to screw it up. We practiced for some time before feeling confident enough to invite Roscoe to a rehearsal. After a run-through, I asked Roscoe if he had any critiques for us. I was somewhat relieved that his only comment was “just don’t get sick before the concert.”<sup>1</sup>

## SOUND

It’s perhaps a cliché to say that you can recognize a musician’s sound within a moment, but Roscoe exemplifies this perfectly, particularly on saxophones. It is hard to pinpoint what makes his sound so distinct, but somewhere between his articulation, pitch inflection, phrasing, and tone is a voice that is utterly unique and powerful (especially when he is playing quietly). From his earliest recording, fittingly titled *Sound*, it seemed to me like he was creating obstacles within the instrument for himself—different “situations” that he had to negotiate depending on the register and dynamics. This stands in stark contrast to classical training, where difficult areas of the instrument are meant to sound easy and fluid. In improvisations you will often find Roscoe constantly shifting his embouchure and the angle and position of the mouthpiece, where the physical interface of the instrument is perpetually unstable.

When I asked Anthony Braxton about Roscoe’s playing, he told me that Roscoe always used the hardest reeds available, “his reed was like a tree bark!” The recordings certainly sounded like it. The strength, or stiffness, of the saxophone reed determines how much air is required to set it into vibration. There are proponents on both ends of the spectrum, but generally softer reeds allow more flexibility and require less force to activate, with the disadvantage of more instability and being prone to choking up when pushed.<sup>2</sup> Hard reeds can produce a timbral richness at the cost of more resistance. When I got to work with Roscoe many years later, I was surprised to find that he was playing soft number-two reeds. (“Tell

Anthony I gave up on those reeds a long time ago!”) But the fundamental quality of his sound has not changed. His conception of the output determines the sound, regardless of changes in the mechanics of the instrument.

Roscoe’s approach to the saxophone is also obsessively focused on minute details of sound production. This is most clearly illustrated in “S II Examples,” a solo recording from 1978. (Released on Nessa N-14/15). The instrument he recorded the piece on, a Vito curved soprano saxophone, was picked out among many for its unique characteristics.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of seventeen-and-a-half minutes, Roscoe examines a small set of resonances from every possible angle, with microtonal inflections produced by closely non-adjacent tone holes, shifts in air pressure and embouchure. Overtone structure, multiphonics, and timbre are articulated methodically, all done at a delicate dynamic level.

The emphasis on specific playing techniques also extends to his works for close collaborators, such as “L-R-G” (also from 1978), written for his trio with Wadada Leo Smith and George Lewis. The score is tailored to the specific language of the performers, each employing a battery of instruments, sometimes switched several times within a page. Despite these rapid shifts, the sounds proceed at an unhurried pace, often enveloped in silence. In his remarks before a 1998 performance at Emory University, George Lewis noted that “L-R-G” created a meditative space—“instead of making things happen, allow them to occur.”

When Roscoe wrote *Angel City* for Willie Winant and myself in 2012, we rehearsed for months as he worked on it. We always recorded the rehearsals, and Roscoe would study them to shape our improvisations in subsequent sessions. The score, then, is a mixture of notation and open elements that are partially composed through rehearsals, built on particular combinations of our languages.<sup>4</sup>

## PRACTICING

A year after I started teaching at Mills College in 2006, Roscoe joined the faculty as Darius Milhaud Chair of Composition. I got to know him and his music more intimately over the next twelve years. For the first five years, we were also neighbors living on campus, and I had the great pleasure of practicing with him, sometimes five times a week over the summer. I was nervous when he first invited me to practice. His regimen was well known (infamous is probably more accurate), and I did not know what I would be confronted with. I urgently worked on sight reading a lot of chromatic music with wide leaps ahead of the session. To my surprise, when

I got to his house he pulled out two well-worn copies of *Universal Method for Saxophone*, probably the most old school set of tonal exercises and etudes for the instrument. We read through it for two hours straight, after which he suggested taking a short break before hitting it again. Over the years we would play through those etudes with every possible combination of saxophones, flute, and clarinet.

In all of the years I practiced with Roscoe, we played etudes and baroque music for the vast majority of the time. He had a seemingly endless supply of Telemann, J. S. Bach, and C. P. E. Bach scores. What struck me was that, despite his obvious mastery of the instrument, he was always working on something. He approached each piece, even the simplest tonal etudes, with intensity and critical evaluation. Pieces with rough edges were slowed down until we really got it right. Tuners were frequently consulted. Registers that did not speak the way he wanted were scrutinized.<sup>5</sup> He never pulled out any of the spectacular things he could do during practice—it was *work*, brutally honest in addressing shortcomings. After a long day of practice, when I couldn't really feel my lips anymore, he would often say, beaming: "There's so much to learn in music, James. There's so much to learn in music." He seemed happiest in those moments.

1 The concert was released by Mutable Music as *Not Yet, Six Compositions* by Roscoe Mitchell.

2 Steve Lacy famously used number one reeds—the softest commercially available, and sanded them down further to make them even more flexible.

3 To this day he laments giving up the instrument, those sonorities now gone with it.

4 *Angel City* would also continue to evolve in subsequent performances and recording.

5 When he undertook a focused study on the bass saxophone (which he had played since the early days of his career), he diligently worked on the different responses of the two lowest notes of his Buescher and Selmer horns. Some ten years later, he is still working on those notes (along with acquiring a third bass sax).

# SO ON AND SO FORTH AN INTERVIEW WITH ROSCOE MITCHELL

John McCowen



I was a late bloomer, a self-taught musician. I came from a DIY college-town scene in the Midwest, exhausting myself in my teen years by screaming and howling in punk and hardcore bands. This is a common trope of college towns in America. But what was more common in DIY punk culture was the almost fascistic restraints placed upon musical taste; most things were re-creative. It was musical reenactment. New bands wore uniforms to let you know what they would sound like: Chuck Taylors, skin-tight black jeans, leather jackets would sound exactly like The Ramones! Bizarre, right?

I was blessed with a community of friends with an unwavering hunger for new music. This craving was accelerated by our local Carbondale, Illinois record store, Plaza Records. The owner, Kim Curlee, quickly picked up on our unrelenting curiosity and showed us the similarities between late-era Black Flag and Ornette Coleman's Prime Time; or how the intensity of grindcore drumming compared to Sonny Murray or Rashied Ali; or how the orchestrations of Frank Zappa could lead us into the Creative Orchestra music of Anthony Braxton. And this period of time—where I was simultaneously listening my way through John Coltrane's entire post-*A Love Supreme* output, the entire Stax Records catalog, and Sun Ra's output chronologically—was a perfect equation leading to the solution of the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

Eventually I put down the microphone and picked up the saxophone. After working through the initial confusion of how the instrument worked, I put on the record *Les Stances A Sophie* by the Art Ensemble of Chicago featuring legendary St. Louis-born singer Fontella Bass. As the first track, "Theme de Yoyo," started, I tried to play along. After a few attempts, I found myself playing in unison with the horns of Roscoe Mitchell, Joseph Jarman, and Lester Bowie. This served as an epiphanic moment; I felt the vibration of the instrument and my connection to it. I haven't put a woodwind instrument down since.

I found myself playing saxophone, flute, and bass clarinet in bands, while continuing to get deeper into music. I attended Southern Illinois University-Carbondale where I was thrust into classical clarinet technique. I eventually rejected the saxophone in a personal quest to find my unique voice. "Free jazz" saxophone playing seemed to have been covered. (I didn't feel there was a need for a Midwest punk sounding like Albert Ayler if he didn't practice.) But my main influence in trying to find my own voice came from listening to Roscoe Mitchell's solo performances, a clear example of someone whose stubbornly endless quest led him to a unique musical situation. I can hear one note and know it's Roscoe. His sound was simultaneous. It wasn't exactly the "sheets of sound" approach of John Coltrane; it was all registers at once.

When it came time to think about graduate school, I found myself wanting a ticket away from the Midwest as well as a starkly different educational experience. I wanted to transition from a technical, classical pedagogy to a more learn-by-osmosis mentorship. I found out Roscoe was teaching at Mills College, and I began sending him emails with my solo clarinet music attached. He seemed to be interested, so I applied.

I went to visit Mills and was told by other students that I wouldn't see Roscoe—that he's just not around—but I almost immediately spotted him on the sidewalk ahead of me in a wool cap and trench coat. I stopped and introduced myself, and he responded, "Carbondale! I've been to Carbondale!" He went on to talk about how many times he had driven that long, boring stretch of I-57 through Southern Illinois up to Chicago in winter months. This was the beginning of a relationship that goes on to this day.

I usually find myself asleep somewhere around dawn and waking up when the sun has reached its peak, but Roscoe had a habit of calling me around 7am and asking me to come practice. Sometimes it felt like bootcamp: he regularly said "John, you've got to understand that I'm an army man." Roscoe is someone who radiates knowledge. I always need to keep my ears open, because I never know when a deeply profound lesson will be uttered. I spent hours playing pieces I'd been working on for him. When I would play my new solo works he would rarely say anything more than "keep working on it." As a student just leaving a classical music education, I found this frustrating. But eventually I realized there is nothing more than that. This is not a way of playing that can be broken down into technical jargon—it's all too personal, and it's on me to make the music as clear as possible. Roscoe taught me that sound is fleeting: only if you continue the work can you bring the utmost clarity to your musical language. Like Eric Dolphy said, "It's in the air and then it's gone."

March 16th, 2016 / 8:15am / Roscoe's office,  
Mills College, Oakland, CA

JMC When you're practicing for a solo performance, what is your process, and what are you preparing to convey?

RM I was going for extending the materials I was using in that particular situation. It's not unlike the pieces you've played for me; where you're working on a particular thing and developing it and extending it and so on. So, it's always my practice to really look at some material and get close to it so it starts to reveal itself to me. Then, I'm able to extend it in a way that I wouldn't have been able to if I had not done that.

JMC So, what is that material that you're trying to extend? A small piece of material that you've improvised with on the saxophone? Or is it an idea you come to before you pick up the saxophone?

RM Well, normally things come to me in stages. Like, these higher tones I was playing on the saxophone. Well, I was doing a concert with Pauline Oliveros, and she said: "Oh! I really like that high note you're doing there. What is that?" I said, "Well, I happened up on it and I decided to keep it." So, that was the first stages of getting into that area.

I consider some of the things I'm doing on my solo record [as being] related to vocal techniques, okay? First came that, then came the ability to add other things along with that. I'm always looking at it like that, too, because you get one thing; then you get another. All of a sudden you've got two. Two normally produces three and so on and so forth like that. I mean, that's the way things come to me.

JMC When you say that you think about it like vocal music, is that how you're approaching the sound when you're performing?

RM I do. It comes from my long musical relationship with Thomas Buckner and playing together . . . being able to have the real dynamics that work for the voice and the real acoustical situation . . . being able to make that adjustment. The voice is like the primary instrument, okay? So, I'm able to project more different types of sounds using that kind of a technique. I've got an older book that I've practiced out of by [Enrico] Caruso . . . [this was] back in Wisconsin . . . with the exercises he worked on. But, that's what I'm trying to do and that led to the *Conversations* records (Wide Hive, 2014).

JMC Did the Space [a trio with Mitchell, Gerald Oshita, and Thomas Buckner] records lead into the *Conversations* records? [*Conversations* were two albums recorded by the trio of Mitchell, Craig Taborn, and Kikanju Baku. These records have been the basis for Mitchell's recent orchestrations for larger ensembles and orchestras.]

RM The solo concept came before the *Conversations* records. By that time I had built up a concept of what I wanted to work on in the studio with my trio.

JMC And how does your solo playing influence your playing with the trio?

RM Well, I think I'm most successful if I'm sounding like an orchestra when I'm playing solo. So, that concept is carried over, especially in the settings with the electronics and so on.

JMC So, if you're playing in a trio, and you're trying to



sound like an orchestra, what are the others trying to sound like?

RM Hopefully an orchestra, too. *[laughter]* Hopefully . . . and I think they were. It's always been my assignment to take whatever's there and have it sound like nothing is missing . . . if it's one person . . . or two or three. I think that Ornette Coleman brought my attention to "Oh, wait a minute, you don't have to have piano, bass, and drums. You can have this or you can have that. You can have whatever you want to have." I'm always trying to take whatever's there and, in the end, make it sound like nothing's missing from it.

JMC What does the use of continuous sound mean to you, and how does it affect you?

RM Well, it kind of affects everything I do. A long time ago, before I could circular breathe, I was hearing these longer lines. Then, when I was able to circular breathe, I was able to bring it together. If I go back to my *S II Examples* (Nessa, 1978) record . . . *[circular breathing]* gave me the opportunity to layer these sounds and multiphonics even more, because I could connect them without having to breathe.

I'm always going back and looking at what I've done and how this next element relates to that and what it can do after. I mean, I'm a big admirer of Frank Wright and the kind of things he was doing on the saxophone. Circular breathing made that even clearer to me because I didn't really have to stop. Although, he was very successful with stopping and taking a breath like that. It just kind of made that bridge that could let all these different things be continuous.

JMC What did it feel like when you first came to that? Because . . . personally, I feel there's a big difference in playing when you have access to have that ability for continuous sound. I mean, you're still thinking in phrases, but like you said, there are bridges in there. I feel it's a different kind of mindset than when you take a breath and then approach your next phrase.

RM Yeah, yeah. That's true. Yeah. I think of it as a bridge. But, I was listening to Eddie Harris playing "The Shadow of Your Smile" (*The In Sound*, Atlantic, 1965) this morning. OH MY GOD, MAN! EDDIE HARRIS, MAN! OH MY GOD! I mean, the way he played that and his ability to sing . . . he was singing through the saxophone. I mean, all the different things that he did. I mean, for me, the saxophone *[has]* so much variety there for people that really want to study it. Everything for me is a continuing kind of thing, and in the end, if I document all the things I'd like to document, I hope to show how all these different things are connected. Well, it's not any different than the way I work . . . to see if I can bring

these things to a real conclusion in a step-by-step method; so they are more clearly understood.

JMC What made you begin to play this way? Who inspired you? Was it an epiphany?

RM I think it started to affect me subconsciously before it affected me consciously. I got back from the army in 1961. I started to meet people who were thinking about music differently than I was. Back then there were a lot of jam sessions, and I used to go to those and play. I would start to hear things, but I wouldn't play them because something was telling me, "Oh, that's not right . . . you shouldn't do that." So, after I started to give in to these things, then it just started to pour out. And then, like I said, I was around people that had already started to explore other ways of doing their music—Joseph Jarman and all these people.

JMC Well, sounds like you went pretty hard at it if you've gone from there to where you are now . . .

RM And there's still a lot more to do! I'm totally excited right now with things that I would like to work on.

JMC What sounds inspire your solo music?

RM Everything. Like my solo concert in Nickelsdorf,<sup>1</sup> it was outside, and this one bird was going on. That inspired me. And not only did it inspire me, it put me in the mood to be in that kind of a space. I knew that this bird was always right! It was always right and it was not in a hurry . . . every sound it was producing was ON! I had just gotten off the plane from The States, and then I went to my hotel, and then I went out to the festival. So, it just put me in that frame of mind where I could be in that space, and when I go back and listen to *[the recording]* . . . and watch the video of it . . . it seemed to have just created a calm space for not only myself but all the people that were there that was listening to it.

JMC Can you think of any other times where you've played solo where something outside yourself like that has helped put you in that space to do that kind of thing?

RM Oh yeah! I mean, if an airplane flies over . . . or anything. I think it's more or less about being comfortable with yourself so you're not being affected that much, and you're able to *[explore]* something you're hearing that just happens to be in the environment at that particular moment. You've got options there. You can get mad or something—and then you're not doing what you're supposed to be doing—or you can just get into the space and . . . make it a whole part of what you're doing.

JMC What is the goal of your mind during solo performance? What is the optimum mental state like?

RM Well, my goal for Iceland is to get practicing, so I can have some chops. *[laughter]* (*At the time of this interview, Roscoe was*

*very preoccupied by an upcoming solo performance in Reykjavik, Iceland.)* It doesn't matter if you got a whole bunch of stuff in your head and you can't project it. I mean, you can think of really good things, but if you don't have the physical thing to do it with then that's not an option. My idea right now is to put the pen down or get away from the computer and go totally into a practice space. I believe my concert there is on the 14th . . . so, I've got pretty much a month now. Spring break [is] next week . . . so, that's gonna give me a really good start [before] things start up again (at Mills College).

JMC So, you're not really worried about getting to a certain mental space before that performance, because you're more concerned about having chops and equipment working?

RM Right! If I have that then I've got the mental space already. But I can't access the mental space if I don't have that, because I don't even know what I can think about 'cuz I can't do it! So, if I can't do A, then I'm certainly not going to be able to do B, ya know? So that's the thing.

I think that music is a thing where sometimes you can do no wrong, okay? Most of the time I'm there . . . I'm focused on what's going on . . . what I'm doing. Certainly, if you practice and you're out there playing every night, [you] can walk out there and do no wrong, but then it doesn't happen every night. I've got to be aware of what's going on, ya know? If I think about a situation where I went out and played a couple of pieces, and it was like, "WHOA!" It was great! Somehow, at that third piece, I thought "Now what?" So, I was smart enough to play a composition. Well, it put me in a space where I'm playing something that I kind of know, and after that was over . . . then I was able to step back into the space that I was in before that. It's always a kind of checks and balance type thing.

The pieces that I do in Iceland . . . [I'm] supposed to play twenty to thirty minutes solo for that. So, I've got one piece on my solo record that's twenty minutes. I may just do one piece. So, I would then work on that with my timer. Then I'd build it up so that I can maintain that space for that amount of time. That's not unlike practicing a piece of music. Some music you practice . . . and you know this . . . just to have the physical strength to be able to do it. The way you can do that is by doing it over and over and over. Yeah yeah yeah . . . I'm definitely thinking I'm gonna do an improvised piece instead of having a written piece.

JMC Well I guess you've got your compositions backlogged in your mind so if that's not happening you can just bust one of those things out.

RM But . . . I think they'll be happening! *[laughter]*

JMC *[laughter]* NO NO NO! I'm not saying that . . .

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RM NO NO NO . . . I'm just saying I think they'll be happening, because I'm getting ready to go into that practice mode, ya know? I'm very excited about it. After I finish, I might have to have a wine to wind down.

JMC Yeah, absolutely.

RM Then I'm thinking about what I did tonight and that carries over until tomorrow. I don't try to do the same thing I did last night because that can be a mistake. So, I try to look at every night different and be open minded and so on like that.

JMC So, every night you might be playing the same material but you are given the opportunity to get farther into that sound and expand upon that?

RM Absolutely . . .

JMC You mentioned Nickelsdorf and that concert where you heard that bird, but when it comes to acoustic spaces, do you have an easier time focusing in a more resonant space?

RM Oh sure, yeah. I look at every situation differently. I've played in places where there's this echo or something . . . so what do you do with that? Well, it's an opportunity to do something with an echo. The opportunity in Nickelsdorf was outside in nature; that's another thing. Then in a hall where you can hear a pin drop; that's another situation.

JMC How long do you think it's taken you to get to the level of focus you're at now? Do you feel you've been at a higher level than now?

RM I think you can always improve that. Concentration is something you have to practice. It's just not there unless you develop it.

JMC Do you practice concentration in ways other than playing music?

RM Yeah, a lot of the times you're away from the instrument you're visualizing what it is you're doing. So, when you go to the instrument you're better. If I'm playing some concert where all of a sudden I'm waiting around until my piece comes up . . . You gotta do that . . . to have yourself somewhat ready. I'm thinking about this concert in Iceland. Let's say I do that piece that's improvised as an encore. What does that mean? That means I'm sitting in the audience listening to all the written music and then I go up onstage for the bow. Then if people are going on and on, and I do the encore of the piece where I'm playing with the orchestra, that means that my horn is backstage. So, I go backstage and get that and it's not warmed up. You see what I'm saying? So, all these different things you have to take into consideration.

JMC If the reeds dried out . . .

RM Yeah! All these different things . . .

JMC What do you think you'd do? Hopefully, the applause

would go long enough for you to go backstage and wet the reed?

RM Nah, man. You take the reed with you . . . and you wet it. And then you put it on the mouthpiece . . . so it's already wet when you go there.

JMC I didn't know if you were trying to hurry up and get back out onstage . . .

RM NO! I'm NOT IN A HURRY, JOHN! *[laughter]* I mean what difference does it make if you take that extra second.

JMC Does your solo performance ever feel like a spiritual or religious experience?

RM Music is spiritual . . . and religious! Music is certainly way up there on that level. I mean, if we were to compare our own selves to that, I don't think we would fare that well. We're really, really small. That's one of the things that has attracted me to music is that all of the possibilities of things that can happen.

JMC So, since we're so small compared to music that's played on such a high level . . . what do you think music on that level is conveying to humans?

RM Well, it's a variety of *conveyments* depending on who you're talking to. You can be at a concert, and you can get one thing, and somebody else, they got something totally different. Then you can go back and listen to it and get something different from that! You can go back AGAIN and get something different from that! So, it's infinite like the universe! I enjoy existing in that realm like that where things can be ongoing.

JMC Would you say your religion is music?

RM I don't know. I mean, that's kind of a narrow statement.

JMC Yeah. Religion can be a narrow thing.

RM Well, yeah. Well, people use it for their own purposes for sure. Even beyond this particular level of existence. To me, this is probably just one layer of what some of the possibilities are.

JMC What are some of those possibilities?

RM I don't know them on this plane! *[laughter]* It might get revealed on the next plane, ya know? I think you have to work hard on this one to even qualify to go on to the next one!

JMC But you said you like to think about those possibilities. Are you just sitting there going "Well, I don't know what this is."?

RM Well I think you can. There are messages that you get. Like, if you think about the universe . . . there's a strong message out there. There are many things. Most of them are totally different! *[laughter]* So there's many things, but there's a message in that. Certainly this planet has many, many possibilities you don't even know! Not to mention things that are out there in the universe! So, I enjoy be-

ing in that realm, and I don't mind working hard to get to the next level of it.

JMC Do you ever feel like you've ever gotten hints of a message in a performance that might suggest another realm?

RM Absolutely! There are nights where you can't do any wrong. *[laughter]* I mean, you wake up from that right away when that's over. And you go back and it might not be there. But at least you know internally that it does exist.

JMC And that helps you keep going?

RM Absolutely.

JMC Now, when you get to a certain space, where you're playing music at a very high level, have you ever felt like you've left your body? Like, you're just listening to yourself play?

RM Well, you can do that through meditation. By meditating you can almost leave your body and have a look at it sitting down somewhere. So, that's totally possible.

JMC Have you even experienced that while playing?

RM While playing and while meditating. Yeah.

JMC Is meditation a part of your regular practice?

RM Not as much now as it used to [be]. I used to do it on a plane a lot of times, just to relax when I'm doing all these concerts and so on . . . running from this airport to that one and getting on a plane and sitting down and being able to really relax.

*[pause]*

Let's look at it. There are people that have achieved lots of things. If you think of Leonardo Da Vinci, he achieved a lot of things in several different fields of art, okay? So, you don't gotta go around looking for something to measure yourself up to; there's plenty of great examples out there, and that lets you know you can achieve these sorts of things. It just depends on what you want to do. You're the only one who can put a limit on what you can do.

JMC Would you say Da Vinci is one of your biggest influences?

RM He's right up there amongst them; but there's so many. Which even reaffirms the possibilities. OH! It's 9 o'clock, John . . . and you were 15 minutes late.

JMC Yeah, man. I got three hours of sleep last night.

RM Oh, ok! *[laughter]* Should I write that down? Let's see here . . . I have a pen and paper here, John. Let's see . . . "John got three hours of sleep . . ." *[laughter]*

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# ROSCOE MITCHELL AT MILLS COLLEGE: DANIEL McKEMIE

Zeena Parkins

DM I studied with Roscoe during my whole time at Mills, and we primarily discussed early music, Baroque music, and orchestration. I also played several concerts of his orchestra pieces and some of his chamber works on timpani and percussion, so I had a fairly good idea of what his style was and where he was going with orchestration.

Roscoe called me to do a transcription from the *Conversations* trio record. This was originally for the Tectonics Festival in 2015 in Iceland. They commissioned Roscoe to do an orchestral work, and he chose to explore transcribing improvisations to create a suite. I chose *Ride the Wind*.

ZP I know because Christopher Luna said he wanted to do that one!

DM Yeah, it was a lot more electronics, slow moving, really subtle. I dove into that and was transcribing in the best way I thought possible for the recording. That was in the late winter, 2014. I remember because I was in Canada, and it was freezing, snowing, everywhere. I did a lot of that transcription in a car ride from Toronto to Montreal and back. The gig was in the spring, and I think it was about February when Roscoe called. He said we've got to take this transcription and now write it for this huge orchestra.

When working on the orchestrations, I found he had these very particular combinations of color that I wouldn't expect. For example, in *Noncognitive Aspects of the City* for orchestra and voice, he had these passages for tubular bells and flute that worked so well. Usually, I would expect glockenspiel and flute or piccolo, and instead it was these really subtle tubular bell passages there.

I would go to Roscoe's house once a week. We'd go through the pieces and what he was doing. Chris [Luna-Megal] was going to school in Virginia at that point; he and I talked often about the process, too. I was right back into this mode of working with Roscoe, talking about orchestration, working on this big project, and it was all so fresh.

Around the time my movement was close to finished, he called me and said he needed me to go to Iceland. He said, "I would love your guys' help rehearsing the orchestra and being another set of ears." From there it became a real group effort with Roscoe leading the vision.

ZP How did you transcribe the electronics? There's already a lot of *you* in there, the way you hear and understand electronics, even though you are staying true to Roscoe's sensibilities. What were the issues for you, in doing it?



DM Yeah, that's a great question. So, with *Ride the Wind*, there are these drawn out, droning electronics. To try and capture those timbres, I took the approach of the spectralists, especially Gerard Grisey and Tristan Murail, and I did a lot of spectral analysis of the recording and picking out the harmonics on the piano. I stacked these harmonics on top of each other to have these bands of frequencies with the goal of mirroring the sound that Craig Taborn achieved on the record.

ZP ... like making a graphic EQ in sounds?

DM Right! Doing the analysis in SPEAR [Sinusoidal Partial Editing Analysis and Resynthesis software], I got the spectrogram and saw the most prominent frequencies. Then, to fill additional space in the orchestra, I would grab the partials of the most prominent frequencies and sprinkle them throughout. The challenge was segmenting the parts to distinctively reference each player on the record. For example, Craig is doing an electronics part and then Roscoe enters. I would ask myself: "How do you distinguish Craig's part from Roscoe's without simply stacking more notes?" This is where being mindful of the instrument groups of the orchestra was so important. Roscoe worked similarly, in that he's really taking into consideration the color of that moment as opposed to first constructing a melody or counterpoint. He would focus on the vertical stacks of the orchestra.

ZP Was there a lot of *divisi* writing?

DM ... for mine, not a ton. Any *divisi* was used to support the strings against the winds and brass, who sometimes played simultaneously. There were also certain parts in the percussion section that were quite important: the crotales, cymbals, and sustaining metals. The drum parts were spread across the section, and they sort of took this semi-improvisational approach to it that worked great.

ZP You did the transcriptions on your own, and then Roscoe invited you to do the orchestration. Would you have meetings with him and go through your work-in-progress?

DM He asked me to do a transcription, and I was just about finished when he asked me to orchestrate. But I don't think he had seen the transcription yet. It was very organic. He was the creative director you could say, but it was rare that he would shoot down ideas, if he did at all. It was a lot of back and forth.

ZP He wasn't micro-managing.

DM Not at all. We were all working together to faithfully recreate what was captured on the record. But, as things often go, it evolved, and the goal became to get something that sounded good and was interesting.

ZP So, just a little bit about that first meeting with the or-

chestra ... you had a week working with Ilan Volkov, which is a luxury. You were translating an improvisation, trying to make something that is alive and flowing and vibrant in all respects—sonically and spiritually—into a composed composition for an orchestra. When you finally heard the orchestration for the first time, do you remember what it was like?

DM I had never had a piece of that scale performed or read before. I was just kind of floored for a minute. The orchestra is an institution, and their general approach or attitude about new music can be a challenge. Thankfully, the percussion section was the engine of the whole thing. They were signed on and really made their presence known during rehearsals. I also scored the piece to be 60 bpm, in mostly 5/4, so it was very easy to align the time of the record with the score and alleviate the heavy demands on counting.

ZP What were the adjustments you had to make once you heard it live?

DM The sustained metals in the percussion needed adjustment. At first, they were sort of improvising, but it was clear they needed to be locked in to what was on the page. I most often deferred to Ilan's suggestions bringing the piece to life. We had discussed nuances both in and out of rehearsal times, which was an amazing experience on its own. A lot of changes were centered on exaggerating everything: dynamics, articulations, tempo fluctuations, and so on. There were also these mini-cadenzas with soloists that would emerge in the work. As the piece unfolded, it was almost like the baton was being passed around momentarily, and Ilan was very into this sort of group effort toward driving the piece.

ZP Was there improvisation?

DM In the score no; it was all completely notated. But there were these passages that would belong to certain players, and when we got to rehearsal, we were into letting the players run with it a bit. Most of them didn't, though. There were a few players in the orchestra that were very much into Roscoe's music, knew it well, and knew where to go.

ZP Can you say then how it worked when you went to different orchestras?

DM The Montreal-Toronto Art Orchestra was twenty players assembled between the two cities. I did the same piece, *Ride the Wind*. This group was made up of players that knew Roscoe's music very well. The instrumentation was wide ranging, with the biggest difference being that they had dedicated drum set and vibraphone players. So, the sustained metal parts went to vibes and crotales, and the percussion parts were truncated for drum set. The piano took on a lot of what the harp played and filled out some of the notes that had to be pruned otherwise.

We just had a lot of fun with this group. We had five rehearsals over five days—a few hours each—and we dug into the intangibles of the music at that point. We talked a lot about styles and players, but also a lot about philosophy, art, energy. And there were moments where nothing needed explanation at all, it just happened. The group was incredibly prepared. There were also other people in the space throughout the week—journalists, students, fellow musicians—and that contributed too. It felt as if the environment itself was really being injected into the music. I remember not so much discussion about notes but about ideas and approach and feel.

ZP Would Roscoe say anything?

DM Not a whole lot. But when he does, it transforms the room. And he usually does it at a moment where you say to yourself, “Okay, I’m going to walk away and think about that for the rest of the weekend.”

ZP Do you remember anything that readjusted your reality?

DM He is very big on the idea of being in the moment, or ahead of it. He would expand on this at Mills too, but during the rehearsals in Canada, he would explain that if you’re following while you’re improvising together, then you’re already behind. This really morphed the approach of the group to be much more urgent in their style, but not frantic. It stepped everything up a notch.

Another moment came at the end of a rehearsal in Iceland. Ilan was pushing the idea for Roscoe to play saxophone over *Splatter*. Roscoe was very unsure about the idea because he was also playing a solo concert during the festival. He voiced concern that he wouldn’t have much more to say if he had to play with the orchestra; it wasn’t part of the plan. That was a pretty impactful moment for me, because you think it’s Roscoe Mitchell, and he can just grab his horn and go. While he certainly *can* do that, and does, seeing how that process of feelings played out was fascinating. It’s not that he didn’t want to play, because he did play, and it was awesome.

ZP Okay, then what happened in Berkeley?

DM The Berkeley gig didn’t have performances but was a recording session at Fantasy Studios for Wide Hive Records, the same label that put out *Conversations*. Greg [Howe] at Wide Hive funded the session, and Roscoe hand-picked about a thirty- or forty-person group in the Bay Area. Steed Cowart conducted the group, and the group were all top players in town. A lot of the group had studied or played with Roscoe at some point.

I transcribed and orchestrated *Cracked Roses*, which was a shorter piece on *Conversations*. For that one, there was the least amount of deliberation. We were in such a mode with the process that we felt it would all fall into place, and it did. I also knew most

of the players in the group and had written for a lot of them at some point, so it was easy to know what you could throw on the page and how it would get handled.

ZP So, was it through-composed?

DM That was all through-composed. I didn’t really want to put any openness in there, because that hadn’t been something we were doing up until that point. If players were taking some liberties with notes, that could sometimes fly, but generally the plan was to still be transcribing and arranging.

Wilfrido Terrazas, an amazing flute player from Mexico—now based in San Diego—came up on an invitation from Roscoe, and they did a lot of improvising together. He was featured as a soloist on a couple of the pieces. Over the course of a couple of days, we recorded the large ensemble pieces, and in the breaks between, Roscoe and Wilfrido would record some duo stuff. Or Roscoe would pick some players from the group and do a session.

At that point there weren’t a ton of surprises. I worked with Steed on the score, and he did an awesome job of translating all of that to the group. Musically speaking with *Cracked Roses*, it was more of a piece that fell into place just fine if you followed the notes and markings.

ZP And then have you done anything with him since?

DM No, that was it. We talked about doing something with Ensemble Intercontemporain, but to my knowledge, the transcription project was done, and he started in a new direction.

ZP Is there anything you can say about what your takeaway from all this is, both from the student’s point of view, and then as a colleague?

DM It’s one of the highlights of my musical career, for sure. Studying with him as a non-practiced improviser was probably much different for me than some others. I can play some jazz vibraphone, but I came up playing in wind bands and orchestra, and then later new music. Like I said earlier, we didn’t talk much about improvisation except in the context of composition and how to place it in a piece, not necessarily how to do it or practice it.

Roscoe is really into Telemann, Mozart, and Bach, and I know that stuff from my undergraduate studies. We talked about the classics, rhythm structures, counterpoint, voice leading. It was very different than what one may expect when discussing or studying composition with Roscoe Mitchell.

Roscoe was also really into John Philip Sousa and wind band music from his time in the Army. After my first year, we put together a group that met in the concert hall to play Sousa marches. We met once a week, and eventually it was about a dozen of us, half of which were faculty in the music department. It was great.

We got more into modern music during my last semester, specifically around orchestration. I was writing a chamber concerto for contrabass clarinet, and there was a lot of work dealing with improvisation and timbre and blending, so we would both bring in books on the subject and talk about what we took from them. Stuff like the Alfred Blatter, Walter Piston, and Samuel Adler books, but also older ones like the Hector Berlioz treatise. We would go through the books and just see how composers would break things open a bit, and then we'd discuss ideas on how to break it open ourselves.

I feel like I've taken that attitude out of those lessons to this day, sort of letting the classics inform modern ideas but not run the show. And just going for it, taking the risks. That's what new music is all about. But I always see him as a teacher. We were collaborators and worked together on a sizable project, but I was always learning from him. And still do! I feel very fortunate to have been able to work alongside him during that time.

<sup>1</sup> Daniel McKemie is an electronic musician, percussionist, and composer based in New York City. Currently, he is focusing on technology that seeks to utilize the internet and web browser technology to realize a more accessible platform for multimedia art. He is also researching and developing new ways of interfacing handmade circuitry, modular synthesizers, and embedded systems to various softwares both new and old. This recent work has allowed for complex, interactive performance environments to emerge, in which software generates compositional processes and actions in the form of analog signals sent to the hardware, and software that can analyze said signals from the hardware to determine musical behaviors.

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# FOR ROSCOE MITCHELL: DARIUS, IS THAT YOU?

Darius Jones

The first time I met Roscoe Mitchell was in 2013 while on tour in Italy. I was practicing in my hotel room when he knocked on my door and asked, “Darius, is that you?” Over the next two days we discussed individuality, his approach to performance, opera, physical health, and many other things that I still think about today.

On the night of his solo performance, I walked in late and heard all this sound reverberating throughout the space, but I couldn’t physically see Roscoe yet. I hurried to a spot where I could watch him and was struck by how casual he looked creating the sounds pouring out of his horn. He was seated in a chair while playing and once he concluded the piece he stood up, walked a few steps and remained standing as he started the next piece. The music he created that night had a deep level of focus and attention to detail. I was listening to someone sculpting sound and utilizing techniques that would serve a greater conceptual vision.

As I walked backstage to prepare for my trio set, I asked myself: “What did I just witness?” There was so much to grapple with artistically it was overwhelming. How he navigated the stage, let alone the music, was something that deserved study. At the time I chalked up what I had observed to Roscoe being more knowledgeable and experienced, but looking back on his performance now, I realize my artistic awareness was conceptually too narrow. He was mining every musical gesture and sound, using the saxophone like a paint brush on a canvas. It didn’t feel like a demonstration or performance but more like a visual artist working in their studio.

Three years after our encounter, I started my solo performance practice. Until then, performing solo was a mysterious space I couldn’t solve for myself. I remember my uncle doing these sax concerts accompanied by an electronic track when I was younger, but I didn’t see them as solo performances. I am not sure why except for the fact that as a young musician I perceived unaccompanied horn outside of a practice room as just a romantic gesture or busking.

When I lived in Queens, I rode the 7 train into Grand Central Station to go to work. There used to be this saxophonist busking down on the lower level playing jazz standards like “My Funny Valentine” and “You Don’t Know What Love Is.” I never saw him ask for money or even engage with the people on the platform; he simply played and was visibly high at times. He had a beautiful sound and always did something uniquely personal with the material. After some time listening to him, I started to realize the standard was just a foil for a greater conceptual idea, because he would always seem to create a universe of suspense with each tune. It sounded like he was crawling around inside of each note and phrase which blurred the line between when he was playing the melody or just improvising over the harmony. His sense of tempo was completely



mysterious, but I could hear him moving through the harmony in ways I hadn't heard anyone do during that time. What inspired me most was how he utilized silence as a tool to bring me in closer.

Watching and listening to him was like experiencing a one-act play or film. It was full of storytelling and humanity which transcended the reality of the situation. He wasn't busking, but he was using that construct to put on these brilliant solo concerts that would last for hours.

That saxophonist was the great Maurice McIntyre aka Kalaparush Ahrah Difda. He was a member of the AACM and was on Roscoe Mitchell's debut album entitled *Sound*.

When I perform solo, I find myself hearing more than just the horn or the chosen material. I hear the possibility of ideas and how any one of those ideas can become a conceptual universe. This is something I notice when Roscoe performs solo; the idea is a starting point or catalyst for the development and manipulation of concept over a period of time and within a musical circumstance. He seems fearless in his pursuit and execution of a concept, even when met with hostility or displeasure from some audiences. This is one of the reasons I chose to perform an excerpt of "Nonaah" from his 1977 album entitled *Nonaah*.

When I listen to the recording, I can hear the frustration of the audience and the relentlessness of Roscoe. One man with a saxophone and ideas against an audience of thousands is how my romantic mind pictures it. In that moment he feels to me like an activist speaking truth to power, and he will not relent until that truth is truly heard.

Even though this version of "Nonaah" is improvisational in nature, it sounds like a compositional work in the way it is structured. The piece exists in three parts, and the level of detail, commitment to melodic expression, and textural manipulation is breathtaking. It has a raw quality and depth of sophistication that evokes indigenous music throughout the world.

During the developmental stage of my solo practice, I decided to interpret pieces by other composers, because I wanted to show an appreciation specifically for Black composers and those whom I considered to be world builders. I've been attracted to the opening motif of this version of "Nonaah" for years because of its repetitive minimalistic quality. The idea of playing one motif and manipulating the timbre of the pitches to create a sense of development was profound to me. It made me think about improvisation differently and helped me to see that shifting timbre, rhythmic placement, dynamics, and frequencies are also acts of improvisation.

Ideas of maximalism and minimalism are compositional concepts that exist within and outside of music. I love concepts

like these because they cause the music to take on a multidimensional artistic quality. For years I've been trying to figure out how to create authentic minimalist spaces in my music that speak to me. Listening to "Nonaah" reminded me of the vocalists I grew up with that would sonically manipulate a repetitive motif to create a spiritual experience in church. Roscoe's music shows us that Black culture is avant-garde in nature. Black creativity has this wonderful feature of existing effortlessly in all artistic spaces. This quality in Roscoe's work has been deeply self-affirming in my development as an artist.

I think it took me a long time to hear myself doing a solo project because most of the folks around me doing so were coming from a Eurocentric perspective on the subject, and anytime someone veered away from that perspective, their solo work felt conceptually limiting. It felt as if folks were experimenting with two conceptual camps: improvise freely with or without compositional material focusing exclusively on sonic exploration or play a tune from jazz or popular song canon and improvise by navigating the harmony through a set of changes in time. Both spaces required a high level of technical skill and could be approached acoustically or with electronics, but I still didn't feel either of those spaces would completely embody my personality and artistic aesthetics.

Ultimately, I didn't want to choose a camp or a style, I simply wanted to find a way to express myself and the things I love about music. The saxophone is a vessel, and my life experience shapes the ideas that flow through it. Through interpretation I felt my concepts around sound, rhythm, and melody would be heard more intensely, like a painter's choice in the surface they choose to paint on. Doing this provided a unique challenge of finding myself within the material and figuring out how the concepts I would use would be reflective of my artistic vision.

Creating one's own world musically is something that I think about a lot artistically. In 2018, I saw Roscoe play solo for about twenty minutes before Matthew Shipp's trio came in behind him at Carnegie Hall. His playing enveloped the hall in a sonic universe where only Roscoe knew the language and made me understand what courage truly looked like as an artist. Nothing he played in that twenty minutes could be considered appeasing or inviting to the audience. As I sat there listening to these high piercing spectral sounds bounce around the acoustical space, I chuckled as some people covered their ears. Roscoe's service to sound is one of the things I love about his musical concept. It's not about good sound or bad sound; it is about sound and all that it encompasses.

The ability to sonically take over an environment also figures prominently in my solo practice. It makes me feel like I am not just

playing the horn but also developing a relationship with the space I am occupying. Listening to Roscoe sonically and physically navigate space has been one of the greatest influences on my playing. His courage to freely occupy space and follow his conceptual creativity to its natural conclusion is what I am striving for as an artist.

Amongst many of the great solo practitioners, Roscoe's solo music has held a consistent inspirational place in my life. I believe the reason for this is because it is about more than just music. To me, Roscoe's solo act isn't a display of technical prowess or presentation of knowledge, but a representation of artistic creativity. He always seems to approach the event in an unassuming manner like a person walking out on their porch to work. Whether he sits or stands, with or without written music, he is allowing the audience to witness his latest creation. Like a painting hanging in a gallery, it can be interpreted a multitude of ways, but it will always be a Roscoe Mitchell.

Back in 2013 when he asked, "Darius, is that you?" I should have said, "Not yet." After we left the hotel, we had a long conversation about individuality and the importance of one having their own sound. The way he talked about it wasn't like I heard people talk about it before. It was bigger conceptually, and I see now it requires a great deal of courage. I am closer to being able to answer that question in the affirmative today, but I still have a ways to go. Thanks, Roscoe, for broadening my awareness and perspective. Nok Bor Fa Ti Ker.

# THIS THING NEVER STOPS

Roscoe Mitchell and Phillip Greenlief  
in conversation

*Editor's Note: This interview between Mitchell and Greenlief was originally published in 2018 by SFMoma's Open Space. This "interdisciplinary publishing platform for artists, writers, et al." will, unfortunately, be closing at the end of 2022. Greenlief approached Sound American in hopes of finding a home for this conversation. Luckily, it coincided perfectly with plans for this issue. While the emotion is bittersweet with the loss of another outlet for artists to publish, we are proud to be able to present this discussion between two great saxophonists here in its original form.*

It would be hard to overstate the importance of Roscoe Mitchell's influence on my generation of musicians—those of us who were just a little too young to have experienced John Coltrane in live performance. He has a singular sound, yet his work as a composer is continually shifting, predicting what is on the horizon. He's a difficult figure to summarize: a solo saxophone concert might span the boundaries of sound language in contemporary improvisation, while a composition could explore the harmonic language of the Baroque period. He is constantly practicing (I remember once discussing the joy of working through J. S. Bach's flute sonatas) and composing when not teaching or touring with one of the many ensembles he leads. While Mr. Mitchell has been operating at the top of his game for several decades, he understands that music is too vast to master in one lifetime, and has devoted himself to the sustainability of Creative Music while inspiring generations of younger musicians. There isn't enough room here to list his accomplishments or the many groups he has led or been a part of, but it is imperative to state that he came out of Chicago in the 1960s, by which time New York had dominated the jazz world for decades. Along with Muhal Richard Abrams, Anthony Braxton, Henry Threadgill, Amina Claudine Myers, and many others, Mr. Mitchell and the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) were responsible for restating the importance of composition in jazz, and for putting Chicago back on the map as a center for musical innovation. Recently, I had the pleasure of sitting with him in his office at Mills College, where he has taught for eleven years. Our conversation touched on various aspects of his storied career, including the concert he will present at The Lab this week, a chance to see him in action as he prepares to move back to Wisconsin.

- Phillip Greenlief

PG I have to start by thanking you. About ten years back I mentioned that I was always planning my solo concerts and I just felt that wasn't improvising, and you said, "Well, try planning half as much." So the next time I had a solo

concert I kept waiting to plan and kept putting it off until the day of the show—and then I didn't plan anything, and it was one of the best shows I had played up to that date.

RM Yes, you have to listen and plan this in real time, you know? And it was interesting being out this time, working with the band and trying to figure out how to get people so they're actually doing that—so that you're not only building things on your own, you're able to build things with other people, because of a knowledge of how they're putting their music together. There was one moment on tour when a trill was in the air, and so there was the opportunity to really explore all the elements of what a trill can do. That kind of research and working together, it helps me in my composing and it helps me in my improvisation; there's just so many different facets of it.

PG Yes. Another thing you said—not resisting if you find yourself in an uncomfortable place—has a great deal of wisdom: maybe it's a new door that you've gone through and you want to explore what's on the other side of that door. You're going to find something there that becomes part of your palette, becomes part of your sound language, becomes part of your music.

RM That's absolutely true. On this tour, we've worked on the thing where we say, "Okay yeah, we're going to start off here and we're going to improvise for a half an hour. The first thing in, we'll try to maybe sound like we're in nature, organic and so on, using space and small sounds." So we worked on that for a bit and then I finally said something similar to what you just said: "You know, let's just go out there and see what's in the air tonight." Because from my own experience, I find sometimes I don't fare that well if I did something good one night and then I go back out the next time and try to do the same thing. But if I'm aware of what the night is offering, I fare better. And it is like you're saying—opening up a new door.

PG I've seen quite a few of your compositions; you tend to use traditional notation, is that true? Is there also work that you've done where you've invented notation systems or, let's say, you were just on this tour and you'll just make a suggestion with some words? But it seems like traditional notation is your mode of working on the page.

RM Well, not entirely. If you think about my ambient pieces and so on, I have a lot of things in there that are not traditional. My rule for that is if I'm going to step outside of the system that we have—which really does communicate—I need to measure up. I need to make sure I've got something that can communicate so that if I'm not around, you might still be able to play my music. So I work at

different methods that can help people get a grasp on that. If I think about improvisation, I think about the elements that are in there and what makes it a success and what does not make it a success and then I go after the parts that are not successful and try to figure out a way of bringing that to the attention of inexperienced improvisers. A lot of times, with inexperienced improvisers, the problem that they're having is not knowing what to play. So I'm creating the situation that gives them materials that they're going to be playing, but gives them the option of moving these materials around the way they want to move them. That's not a bad place to be in an improvisation: you've got your materials, you know what it is you're going to be doing. And it gives inexperienced improvisers the possibility of remaining in real time inside of the improvisation, for longer periods of time. That helps with development later on.

PG I find another problem that arises with younger improvisers is they can posit an idea, but then they pull back and they don't develop the idea. We're at Mills College, and you've been teaching here for a long time. I realize you're a professor of Composition, but I have to imagine you talk about improvisation with your students as well. These two things are two sides of the same coin, right?

RM Absolutely. They are. I advise students to study composition and improvisation as parallels. So, definitely I talk about these different kinds of questions. I think that improvisation is no different from any other music; you always need to be able to rehearse whatever it is that you're doing. So, say you're working on something and it's not quite going the way that you want it to go. You just stop and say, "Okay, I'm going to go back to that." It may not be exactly the same, it might be in that same area of study, and you work it out 'til you get it sounding like you want it to sound. These developments are close-knit with composition.

PG How do you teach development? This is an area that I find difficult for students to get past. They think of an idea [vocalizes a simple melody], but how do you sustain that for more than a minute?

RM That's right. Well, there's many different ways, like what you were just saying. You can change the duration of all those pitches, that's one way. You can change the way it's phrased, the dynamic structure. What you sang is enough material to really do a lot with. Because you've got all these different elements and if you're doing it with someone else, you're not stuck in a place where there's only one option, and you can't go anywhere with that. That's the way to get the development going, by looking at every side of the problem and gradually picking it apart and developing all these differ-



ent parts of it. That way you gain extension. I always like to keep a timer with me; if I was doing something for ten minutes and I want to extend it to fifteen or twenty minutes, I know that I can go to that. If I'm not doing it in real time, then I don't really know what I'm talking about.

PG Got you. I love using a stopwatch—otherwise you get lost, and you think, “Wow, I’ve been doing this for twenty minutes.” And no, you’ve been doing it for two-and-a-half minutes. *[laughter]*

RM That's right, that's right.

PG So really it's the same concerns that Haydn or Beethoven had, in terms of variation. Thinking about those elements—elongating a phrase, changing the pitch, putting the music in a different meter—all these things that composers have been dealing with for all these years. They haven't gone away.

RM No they haven't.

PG You work in the tonal system and your music also has a really rich sound language. Sounds that don't fit into the tonal system. Of course, everything has a vibration, everything has a pitch. A bell has a pitch. Is there a political aspect to this, or is it all just different colors you can paint with?

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RM Well, I like to study opposites. And the saxophone provides you a platform to be able to do that. I always think the saxophone is one of the most versatile instruments; you have a lot of things to choose from because of all the people who've used it and what they've done with it. Yeah, I work on being able to not really be in the chromatic system for long periods of time. And that's because of a lot of different elements. The work that I've done with David Wessel from way back when the International Computer Music Conference started . . .

PG When was that?

RM Well, David Wessel had the first computer music conference in the United States—this had to be shortly after I got back from Europe with the Art Ensemble.

PG Oh, '71.

RM Yeah, in that period. And then he later went onto IRCAM [Institute for Research and Coordination in Acoustics/Music] to work for Pierre Boulez. David was very excited about the work with the computer and wanted me to come over to his house. He said he'd been up all night and I went over there, and he was playing one note for me and I said, “David, I'm going to try to keep up with you on the saxophone.” It goes back to that. And my study of opposites, of being able to be in the chromatic system and being able to be out.

There's a lot of stuff waiting around to be developed, I'm telling you. I'm having fun making these discoveries right now. And wanting to even have more time to explore.

For example, Ilan Volkov invited me to premiere a piece with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra in Glasgow, Scotland. And that's where I premiered the version of “Nonaah” for full orchestra. Then later on he invited me to come to Reykjavik with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra. I didn't want to go back there with the same piece that I had in Scotland, so I got this idea of finding people that would help me transcribe some of my improvisations, both from my solo CD *Sustain and Run* and my trio CDs *Conversations I* and *II* with Kikanju Baku and Craig Taborn. The first person I asked was Paul Steinbeck. Do you know Paul Steinbeck? He was a student of George Lewis, and he just recently wrote a book on the Art Ensemble of Chicago called *Message to Our Folks*. Paul put me in touch with several people who were interested in making transcriptions of these improvisations.

And what this is for me is an ongoing process of developing an improvisation. If I say, “Phillip, I'd like you to come and be the soloist on this piece,” it's like I'm saying, “Phillip, I want you to come and improvise with Craig Taborn, Kikanju Baku, and myself.” So the process starts to grow. In some cases, I've taken one piece



Art Ensemble of Chicago performing at Café Oto, London, October 15, 2017. From left to right: Junius Paul, Roscoe Mitchell, Hugh Ragin, Don Moye. Photo: Luke McKernan.

and made two out of it. For instance, “They Rode for Them” was originally a piece for bass saxophone and drum set. In the first orchestration, I used a drum set to create the orchestration for the orchestra. I took myself off of bass saxophone and reinserted myself on soprano as an improviser. The following month I had a performance in New York where I used the bass saxophone part to create an orchestration that features Sara Schoenbeck on bassoon as soloist. So you see, it’s always growing. This piece that I’m writing now was about seven minutes in length and the Ensemble InterContemporain requested a piece for twenty minutes. So I’ve taken that material and developed it into all of these different variations, so it fills out the duration that they’re asking for. This is an ongoing thing that I’m really excited about—having the opportunity to both study it by writing it and also from actually playing it.

PG You’ve been here eleven years at Mills. And this is your last semester, is that right?

RM Next semester.

PG You’re going to finish the academic year out. I’m glad to hear that. What’s the biggest challenge you face when teaching students?

RM Sometimes I look at the students’ portfolios and I’m always amazed at how much work these people are getting done. I think, “Wait a minute, I’m in the wrong business here. I need to be a student.” So yeah, that’s great. I’m inspired by my students.

PG Do you mind if I ask you to talk a little bit about being in Chicago in the late ’50s? You were at Wilson College with Malachi and Jarman and Braxton and Threadgill and—what was in the water? I mean, you guys came out of this community college and changed the face of jazz. Do you remember what you were thinking about and talking about in those days? What you wanted to do?

RM When I got back from the army, you know, most people in Chicago were probably a bit more advanced than I was. I had heard Ornette Coleman when I was in the army and met Albert Ayler, but when I got back, it was Coltrane’s record that started to open me up a little bit—on the album *Coltrane*, where he was using modal concepts to create improvisation. Then I started to go back to listen to Ornette and Ayler and all of these people, and it started to become clearer to me. I was lucky to be in a place where you’ve got a lot of people with a similar vision about music in mind, you know? And that are willing to stick with it. I mean that’s what I got out of the early days in Chicago. And here we are: 2015 was the fiftieth anniversary of the AACM, and 2019 is the fiftieth anniversary of the Art Ensemble of Chicago. I think for me, it’s really going to take a long time to get to the point that I’m trying to get to in music.

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Art Ensemble of Chicago performing at the New Jazz Festival Moers, 1978. From left to right: Lester Bowie, Don Moye, Roscoe Mitchell.



And it’s nice to have this momentum, to want to pursue and study like that. Perhaps if someone had said to me a long time ago, “You know, this thing never stops”—I don’t know how I would have felt about it. But now I see that there’s no lack of things to do.

PG No.

RM On no front at all, on no front at all.

PG Will you be teaching when you go back to Madison? You’re going back there when you leave here, is that right?

RM Well yeah, I still have my home in Fitchburg. I’m looking for a nice period of just being able to know what I’m going to be doing, just for a month or something because, well, I have been going at it. It takes me awhile to get back in it, you know what I mean?

PG Mmhm. So it’d be nice to have time to compose.

RM Oh yeah. To compose and to practice and all of that. I mean it just seems that all of a sudden, somebody turned on the busy button here. It’s like, “Whoa, man.” And then the computers—like, whoa. Everything is big, bigger than life, man.

PG Yeah, the work that’s been coming out the last couple years that you’ve produced is really extraordinary. *Bells for the South Side*, and also the album with The Transatlantic Art Ensemble.

RM Yeah, the one with Evan Parker. Mmhm.

PG It sounds like you've got a lot more stuff coming out that we don't know about yet! And you just did this recording session in October.

RM Right, yeah I did.

PG Now you're calling it the Art Ensemble of Chicago...

RM Right.

PG It's a very different group.

RM A long time ago—we always said that, “You know, if the Art Ensemble goes down to only one person, that's the Art Ensemble.” So as long as like, we've got two people functioning...

PG You and Mr. Moye.

RM Yeah, so that's it. And he brings what he's doing with African percussion, and I'm coming from another side. The makeup of the group is—of course, he and I—and then there's Nicole Mitchell on flute and Fred Barry and Hugh Ragin on trumpets. There's Christina Wheeler, voice and live electronics, there's Mazz Swift, violin and voice, and Jean Cook on violin, Eddy Kwon on viola, and Tomeka Reid on cello. Silvia Bolognesi on bass, Jaribu Shahid on bass, Junius Paul on bass. Dudu Kouaté and Enoch Williamson on African percussion. It's a world of sound.

PG I saw a couple videos from Europe of this recent tour. It's sounding great, the music's fantastic. What about the quartet that's going to play The Lab? Is this a group that you've been working with for a while?

RM Yes—I have with Vincent Davis and Junius Paul. I first met Vincent Davis when he came with guitarist Manty Ellis to visit the class I was teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1987. We've continued to play music together since then in a lot of different configurations. Junius Paul came along later. The first concert we played together was at the Constellation in a memorial concert for Fred Anderson, which became a recording on Nessa titled *Celebrating Fred Anderson*. This is my first concert with Ambrose Akinmusire. Recently, Nicole Mitchell told me that Ambrose was living in the Bay Area, and said she wanted to introduce me to him. I sent him an email and we got together to play some music. This concert at The Lab will be our first performance together.

PG Is it an improvised music ensemble? Are you bringing compositions into it? Or is it always both for you?

RM It's going to be both, because Ambrose and I are out here, and there's no excuse for us not to get together and practice. And then Vincent and Junius, they practice together every day. They're both from Chicago. Who knows, man? If I could get up from this computer, I could get out my bass saxophone or something, man. This is my do-or-die week. I need to get the score to the ensemble about a week from now. But then the parts are not due until De-

cember, so I guess I would have that little bitty time to make final changes to the score and that kind of thing. But I'm learning so much, just about the way you mark the materials; you almost get the instruments talking.

PG You mean in the way that you're using articulation marks [on your scores]?

RM Yeah. Like you listen to some of these old bands, too, with the mutes and things that people were doing. I mean they were talking, basically.

PG You mean like, Ellington, the early recordings on something like “East St. Louis Toodle-Oo”?

RM Yeah, yeah.

PG Yeah, those trumpet players.

RM Oh yeah, yeah. Definitely.

PG We don't get to hear you enough here, you know? It's been great that you've been here all these years. I mean, your presence is felt whether you're out playing around or not.

RM Well, I've been busy out here, that's for sure.

PG Anything else you'd like to say about being in the Bay Area?

RM Well, it's going to probably take me a little while to get used to Wisconsin weather, you know? I went back there one time to Minneapolis and it was right in the middle of winter in December. It was for a concert with Douglas Ewart and Adam Rudolph, Yusef Lateef, and myself at the Walker Arts Center. Man, I hadn't experienced those kinds of temperatures for a while. It was way below zero. Before I came out here, I was kind of used to it. But I can get used to it again.

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# 2022 PART THREE ENTER THE IMPOSSIBLE COSMOS: WAVE-PARTICLE KNOTS

Composer: Jessie Cox

Originally based on the parlor game *Consequences*, in which texts were assembled by guests without seeing (due to creative folding) what previously was written, *exquisite corpse* became an important source of collaboration and creative experimentation for surrealist writers and artists such as André Breton, Joan Miró, Tristan Tzara, and Marcel Duchamp. These artists used a form of the game as a way of assembling visual and textual ideas into a form that they could not have foreseen and, therefore, had very little control over. Some of the results were astounding, others less so. Every result, however, was something new.

*Sound American's* version of *exquisite corpse* adds a few twists in keeping with our milieu and mission. Each cycle, three composers will collaborate on a short work specifically for SA, to be published in that cycle's journals. One artist will go first, passing on a set of information to the next, who, in turn, will add, subtract, and change that information to create a new version of the piece before passing it on to the third, who will create a "final" take on the composition. The readers of *Sound American* will get to watch the whole process as it occurs as each version will be reproduced in subsequent issues.

This round of *exquisite corpse* is brought to a close with a new piece by New York-based composer Jessie Cox. *Enter the Impossible Cosmos: Wave-Particle Knots* takes the previous conceptual work of Ka Baird and Jules Gimbrone and launches it into a warmly technological embrace of the universe.



Before performing the adventure, please visit this link for instructions and for descriptions of the planets:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/17\\_HJ9NBh9YapVzYGbU7ADMHeGqRsgqp1sAW2VpUyDCo/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/17_HJ9NBh9YapVzYGbU7ADMHeGqRsgqp1sAW2VpUyDCo/edit?usp=sharing)



This link is the computer version of the actual cosmos map/world in 3D. You will need this to see the planets and their parameters: <https://play.unity.com/mg/other/test-972t>

## ADVENTURE

### Section I

1) Sirens (frequency range unknown) interacting across time and space clashing near the planet FT create a set of interference patterns that cause particles to entangle. This generates a series of coupled, entangled, or knotted, wave-particle collections that gain mass over time and are thus attracted gravitationally to the planet FT.  
2) You form yourself as a wave-particle packet and land on FT's surface. Choose between these two routes:

A) You explore, in the spirit of Ka Baird's *Proximity Exercises II (Emergency Studies)* in *Sound American* 27, the further generation of knotted wave-particle collections.

B) You explore, in the spirit of Jules Gimbrone's *An Attention Equation* in *Sound American* 28, the wave-particle collections that form you.

If A:

1) Further wave-particle knots form. You discover your entanglement with them.  
2) Formed wave-particle knots can move through space by means of their re-knotting and dissolution, effectively creating and destroying their mass existence (to a certain limited degree). This allows for the circumvention of gravity, and since FT has no atmosphere, you end up simply drifting away. To do this you discover

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that wave-particle knots that meet annihilate or create new wave-particles through interference.

3) You land on LBD. Move to Section II.

If B:

1) Through investigation of your inner workings, you discover that you are simply knots of entangled particles.

2) You can disentangle and entangle new wave-particle knots through wave-particle collisions creating new interference patterns resulting in different wave-particle knots. This allows you to change shape but also change positioning in space effectively allowing you to travel through space. This allows for the circumvention of gravity, and since FT has no atmosphere, you end up simply drifting away.

3) You land on LBD. Move to Section II.

### Section II

1) On LBD you meet many travellers. Please introduce yourself to everyone. Who are you? We know you are made of wave-particle knots, but we don't know your story yet. Tell us who you are by uploading a video using the Instagram/Facebook filter under the following link. Add the corresponding hashtag when uploading your video (always add #entertheimpossible #implbd). You can also explore who else is on LBD by searching the hashtags. [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1\\_I7JtgoBYokI3x1rLupWrxt4JCZ5jdATZwA7pg7gTnk/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_I7JtgoBYokI3x1rLupWrxt4JCZ5jdATZwA7pg7gTnk/edit?usp=sharing)



## PROGRAM NOTES

Musical scores and music-making as space travel, transformation, or creation has been a concern of mine for quite a while. This work, which is part of a larger cosmos, springs forth from such matters of concern about—matters of care for—space. Space is here not simply a geographic location separable into places and distinct from lives, but is rather articulation of lives lived in (un-

der)common. Roscoe Mitchell's work "S II Examples" provides example of a musical practice that refuses the sovereignty of the one based in ownership of land. Rather, it speaks out from—and with—the unknown: Each sound is a complex composite, and there are lines in overtones inside multiphonics. (Lines is maybe the wrong conception, because they do not function by themselves; they cannot sound by themselves—they come forth as complex quilting patterns where weaving is spinning out from other knots that are nothing in themselves.)

The larger cosmos within which this work here, these pieces, exists was conceived initially as a piece for the Sun Ra Arkestra and Laura Cocks, Pauline Kim Harris, Conrad Harris, Tyler J. Borden, Eddy Kwon, and Sam Yulsman, commissioned by the Fromm Foundation and to be premiered November 5th, 2022 in NYC.<sup>1</sup> Of course there is not enough space here to list everyone involved, and at the same time this is a space to name a few so as to hint to a network of entangled lives that sound together into/as music. It is with an approach—a way of living or a practice—to dates, names, lives, and sounds that considers not-ones, those that consent not to be single beings, those that are of blackness, black holes, entangled (k)nothingness's that these pieces come into/as music. In these works, I thus wanted to develop further a practice of musical notation that represents W. E. B. Du Bois's brilliant example of the city directory: a place where lives appear, and not a text/institution that sanctions and in the same turn delimits life.<sup>2</sup> Aren't musical scores remnants of, and wishes for, meetings in sound? This musical score, this impossible cosmos, evolves, breathes, transmutes with each performance, each reading, each sounding of it and into it.

1 The Sun Ra Arkestra piece is called "Enter the Impossible," and this here work is part of the cosmos that springs forth from such musical composition as meetings in sound.

2 See W. E. B. Du Bois. "My evolving program for Negro freedom." *Clinical Sociology Review* 8, no. 1 (1990): 5.

Compiled by  
Sam Weinberg

- Roscoe Mitchell Quartet: *Before There Was Sound* (Delmark), 1964 (Released 2011)
- Roscoe Mitchell Sextet: *Sound* (Delmark), 1966
- Roscoe Mitchell Art Ensemble: *Old/Quartet* (Nessa), 1967/68 (Released 1975)
- Roscoe Mitchell Art Ensemble: *Congluptious* (Nessa), 1968
- The Art Ensemble: *1967/68* (Nessa) (Released 1993)
- The Art Ensemble of Chicago: *Reese and the Smooth Ones* (BYG Records), 1969
- The Art Ensemble of Chicago: *A Jackson in Your House* (BYG Records), 1969
- The Art Ensemble of Chicago: *Bap Tizum* (Atlantic), 1973
- The Art Ensemble of Chicago with Muhal Richard Abrams: *Fanfare for the Warriors* (Atlantic), 1973
- Roscoe Mitchell: *The Solo Saxophone Concerts* (Sackville Recordings), 1974
- Roscoe Mitchell: *Nonaah* (Nessa), 1977
- Roscoe Mitchell: *L-R-G / The Maze / S II Examples* (Nessa), 1978
- Roscoe Mitchell: *More Cutouts* (CECMA), 1981
- Roscoe Mitchell/Tom Buckner/Gerald Oshita: *New Music for Woodwind and Voice* (1750 Arch Records), 1981
- Roscoe Mitchell: *Roscoe Mitchell & The Sound and Space Ensembles* (Black Saint), 1987
- Roscoe Mitchell: *Four Compositions* (Lovely Music), 1987
- Roscoe Mitchell Quartet: *The Flow of Things* (Black Saint), 1987
- Roscoe Mitchell: *Solo [3]* (Mutable Music), 2003
- Roscoe Mitchell: *Composition/Improvisations 1, 2 & 3* (ECM), 2007
- Roscoe Mitchell: *Not Yet (Six Compositions)* (Mutable Music), 2013
- Roscoe Mitchell with Craig Taborn and Kikanju Baku: *Conversations I and II* (Wide Hive Records), 2014
- Roscoe Mitchell: *Sustain and Run* (Selo SESC), 2016
- Roscoe Mitchell: *Bells for the South Side* (ECM), 2017

## DAVID BROWN

David Brown is a designer, researcher, and educator based at the School of Architecture at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Brown investigates non-hierarchical, flexible, and variable approaches to urban design. For more than a decade, Brown's work has focused on *The Available City*, an ongoing speculation on the potential of Chicago's city-owned vacant land.

## JOHN CORBETT

John Corbett is a writer, curator, and producer based in Chicago. He is co-owner of the art gallery and record label Corbett vs. Dempsey and his recent books include *A Listener's Guide to Free Improvisation* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), *Vinyl Freak: Love Letters to a Dying Medium* (Duke University Press, 2017), and *Pick Up the Pieces: Excursions in Seventies Music* (University of Chicago Press, 2019).

## JESSIE COX

Jessie Cox is a composer, drummer, educator and scholar, in pursuit of his Doctorate Degree at Columbia University, whose work engages experimentalism and afrofuturism.

## JAMES FEI

James Fei (b. Taipei, Taiwan) is a composer, saxophonist and live electronic musician.

## PHILLIP GREENLIEF

Since his emergence on the west coast in the late 1970s, saxophonist/composer Phillip Greenlief has achieved international acclaim for his recordings and performances with musicians and composers in the post-jazz continuum as well as new music innovators and virtuosic improvisers. He lives in Oakland, home of the Black Panthers and Lois the Pie Queen.

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## DARIUS JONES

Darius Jones is a critically acclaimed composer and saxophonist embracing individuality and innovation in the tradition of African American music. His music is a confrontation against apathy and ego, hoping to inspire an authenticity that compels us to be better humans.

## JOHN MCCOWEN

John McCowen is a clarinetist and composer living in Reykjavik, Iceland. His interests currently revolve around the contrabass clarinet.

## ZEENA PARKINS

New York-based electro-acoustic composer/improviser Zeena Parkins is a pioneer of contemporary harp practices. Using expanded techniques, object preparations, and electronic processing she has redefined the instrument's capacities.

## TOMEKA REID

Cellist and composer Tomeka Reid has emerged as one of the most original, versatile, and curious musicians in Chicago's bustling jazz and improvised music community. A 2022 Herb Alpert awardee, 2021 USA Fellow, 2019 Foundation of the Arts and 2016 3Arts recipient, Reid received her doctorate in music from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 2017. She is currently the artist in residence with the Moers Jazz Festival.

## TYSHAWN SOREY

Newark-born composer and multi-instrumentalist Tyshawn Sorey (b. 1980) is celebrated for his incomparable virtuosity, effortless mastery and memorization of highly complex scores, and an extraordinary ability to blend composition and improvisation in his work. Sorey has received support for his creative projects from The Jerome Foundation, The Shifting Foundation, Van Lier Fellowship, and was named a 2017 MacArthur fellow and a 2018 United States Artists Fellow.

## KEN VANDERMARK

Ken Vandermark is an improviser, composer, saxophonist/clarinetist, curator, photographer, and writer. In 1989 he moved to Chicago from Boston and has worked continuously from the early 1990s onward, both as a performer and organizer in North America and Europe, recording in a large array of contexts, with many internationally renowned musicians, and in 1999 was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in music.

## SAM WEINBERG

Sam Weinberg is a saxophonist, improviser and composer from Queens, NY.



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