

The Golden Age of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation

FYS 129

David Keffer, Professor
Dept. of Materials Science & Engineering
The University of Tennessee
Knoxville, TN 37996-2100
dkeffer@utk.edu
<http://clausius.engr.utk.edu/>

Various Quotes

These slides contain a collection of some of the quotes largely from the musicians that are studied during the course.

The idea is to present “musicians in their own words”.

Nicole Mitchell



American flautist & composer (February 17, 1967-)

Mitchell on a Message Worth Transmitting

Mitchell: Message: “Remember, I can only give you bits of truth woven from my mind myth, but I believe most of it and live on.”

“What Was Feared Lost”, Mitchell, Nicole, collected in *Arcana VIII: Musicians on Music*, edited by John Zorn, Hips Road, New York, 2017, p. 235.

Mitchell on Creativity and Improvisation

EW: ...How would you describe your vision?

Mitchell: I would have to start with the inspiration of my mother, who loved to paint and to write creatively, and who was constantly expressing ideas of other worlds through her art. She impressed that upon me—how to take blankness or nothingness and create a combination of what's familiar and what's unknown, or what's never existed before, with creativity—whether with music, or visual art, or with writing a story. That always fascinated me, so I like working with that idea of a bridge. There's where we are, there's how we perceive our reality. Then there's always those special moments, whether they be of fear or of inspiration, when it's like the world has suddenly cracked open and it's way more than we ever imagined. That's what I seek when I improvise. That's why I love to improvise. Because improvisation is a practice that allows you not to be focused on the smallness of who you are and your reality, but to actually experience the greatness of possibility and surprise and spontaneity.

Interview with Ellen Waterman, *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, 2008.

Mitchell on the AACM

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

Interview with Ellen Waterman, *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, 2008.

Mitchell on the Xenogenesis Suite

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

Interview with Ellen Waterman, *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, 2008.

Mitchell on the Important Traditions

Tapiz: Tradition is very important in jazz. What is the most important tradition in Nicole Mitchell's music?

Mitchell: Individuality and Originality are philosophies at the root of jazz that I embrace, along with the concept of swing and syncopation. I embrace these essentials of the tradition, and I honor historical periods of the music through my compositions.

Interview with J.F. Tapiz in TomaJazz, 2004

Mitchell on Allowing Creative Music to Evolve

Mitchell: The only other thing I would like to say is that as lovers of creative music, and/or jazz music, we need to support its growth and development, to accept change as necessary for its vitality. When we over-traditionalize some historical approaches to the music, we risk losing the relevancy to our times. I wish for us to celebrate music that is truth for this moment that we live. A very unstable, interesting, horrifying and beautiful moment indeed.

Interview with J.F.Tapiz in TomaJazz, 2004

Mitchell on a Message Worth Transmitting

Mitchell: Outside that wall, I have to say, it's not that it's magical. It's untouchable and unseeable, but it's real. You know, better than that, if you practice your connection to the stars enough, you can go anytime you please...And even better, I'm tellin' you, there are no consequences, no punishments and no side effects except joy and more strength. Can you imagine? I'm thinking, maybe we can build a bridge from pain to hope and insight and take all our families there...Maybe our barcodes can even be rubbed off? This new awareness, this realm of making, this dark maroon cloud, it's a hidden choice that we all have, but it's been so lied about and covered up with opaque abuses and accusations and candy wrappers. It's hard to find. I wanted you to know! I think the bridge was discarded by the shoebox designers thousands of cycles ago. It was taken from our schools because they feared it would weaken our obedience. Only some of our elders remember now. In truth, it's a birthright to our species, perhaps the most important one. A gift directly from the blue marble that we all depend on, and now, like sight, the vision behind one's closed eyes to the maroon clouds of otherness is a mine of our mind where we can excavate new designs of sound, paper, ink, words and on one can stop us. You know when you know, you know. No one can take that from you.

"What Was Feared Lost", Mitchell, Nicole, collected in *Arcana VIII: Musicians on Music*, edited by John Zorn, Hips Road, New York, 2017, p. 223.

Mitchell on The Edge of Beauty

Mitchell: Beauty, in the way that western hegemony dictates it, is not nearly whole enough to embrace all of us, especially us *others*. In my musical development, I've reached for what I call *the edge of beauty*, venturing out into spaces where one becomes uncomfortable and unsure whether what they're experiencing is beautiful or not. I seek this edge sonically. I add my singing voice or a growl to my flute sound to make the atonal melding of textures, because I see discomfort as a doorway to new revelations--new worlds. This call for imagining an alternative reality through creative work is, in a sense, a response to the need for a wider, more inclusive celebration of beauty.

Can you take a moment and breathe with me?

Mitchell:

One, two, three.

Can you take a moment and breathe with me?

One, two. Hold, and release.

Breathing helps us to stay centered and open.

I'm breathing with you.

I ask you to keep an open mind as you read, and observe your reactions as a way of us learning more about ourselves.

If you become uncomfortable, know that means there is something to gain.

Lean in.

Imagination as a Tool for Social Change

Mitchell: Through individual and small group efforts, we can collectively build new narratives and concepts capable of reverberating through-out human consciousness. We can rupture static hierarchies and create foundations for new worlds.

Together/Not Together

Mitchell: I've experienced a powerful organizational embodiment of *together/not together* as a member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). While the musician-composers of the AACM are together in sharing overlapping experiences of black cultural heritage, a key to the success and impact of the collective is that we also support one another being *not together*. The AACM's strength lies in its members' personal artistic visions and pursuits. Rather than hailing one signature musical approach for all, the group heralds the uniqueness of each and provides support for individual artistic exploration and experimentation. I believe that one of the AACM's greatest achievements has been in providing tools for liberating Black minds.

Mitchell on her mother's legacy

Mitchell: When I was a teenager, my mother, JBM, died by suicide. An African American woman artist who felt controlled by hostile voices in her mind, she was in many ways invisible to society. She was isolated, misunderstood, unrecognized, and underappreciated for her potential offerings. Incredibly prolific, JBM continually created without reward or the possibility of her artwork being shared or valued...Perhaps in a culmination of frustration, JBM chose to die, and I, who was left behind, realized that to live is a choice. I decided that each act that we make as individuals in our lives is a choice that we can use to co-create our future, either positively or negatively. Each action we make has layers of symbolic meaning that have real impact on the universe.

Mitchell on Narrative

Mitchell: I know clearly that narrative is at the core of my compositional process due to JBM's influence. Whether the audience is aware or not, every piece of music I create was at first a story before it became sounds. And as a musician in these dystopic times, I am compelled to express layers of thoughts and feelings through music. Channeling Black science fiction became an exciting and fruitful way to do this.