



This disc, recorded in February 2018 at the CTM Festival in Berlin, is the latest chapter in a creative partnership that spans five decades. Roscoe Mitchell (1940–) and George Lewis (1952–) met in the summer of 1971 on Chicago's South Side, where both musicians were born and raised. Mitchell and his group, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, had just returned to the South Side after a two-year sojourn in Europe, and Lewis was back home too, taking a break from his undergraduate studies at Yale. One day, Lewis wandered into a rehearsal of an ensemble from the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) and introduced himself to the group. Within weeks, he was performing with Mitchell and a number of other AACM members. Since then, Mitchell and Lewis have given countless concerts and recorded several albums, including Roscoe Mitchell Quartet (Sackville, 1975), Nonaah (Nessa, 1977), and Shadowgraph (Black Saint, 1978).

On many of these concerts and recording dates, Mitchell and Lewis were joined by Muhal Richard Abrams (1930–2017), the composer, pianist, and electronic musician who co-founded the AACM in 1965. To both Mitchell and Lewis, Abrams was a teacher, mentor, friend, and lifelong collaborator. In 2003, the three musicians united once again for a concert at the Venice Biennale, after which they decided to continue working together as “The Trio,” recording the album Streaming (Pi, 2006) and performing across the globe. Abrams passed away in October 2017, four months before the CTM Festival, but his presence can be felt on this recording, particularly during the middle section of the concert. After playing as a duo for almost twenty-two minutes, Mitchell and Lewis invite another player into the performance: a piano powered by Voyager, Lewis’s improvising computer program.

Created in 1987, Voyager was developed from an earlier interactive work, Rainbow Family (1984, <https://medias.ircam.fr/x015be3>), which was conceived as a piece for human improvisers and a software-generated virtual ensemble. Premiered at IRCAM, the Pierre Boulez-founded center for computer music in Paris, this pre-Voyager work listened to four improvisers—Derek Bailey, Joëlle Léandre, Steve Lacy, and another AACM collaborator, Douglas Ewart—while sending its musical output from a network of three Apple II microcomputers to a set of Yamaha synthesizers programmed with quasi-orchestral timbres.

Voyager’s software took advantage of the increased power of the first Atari and Macintosh computers, and by the 1990s the program performed as a 64-player virtual orchestra, producing an even wider variety of sounds using MIDI-controlled sample players. Crucially, Voyager’s timbral resources were not limited to the instruments heard in classical symphonies, and the textures it employed were rarely as dense as a tutti orchestra. Instead, the program usually chose to form smaller, overlapping “ensembles” that combined orchestral strings, winds, and percussion with microtonally-inflected instruments from Africa, the Americas, Asia, and the Middle East. These configurations sounded like a gathering of AACM multi-instrumentalists—for instance, Mitchell’s Art Ensemble (with whom Lewis performed in 1977) or Abrams’s Experimental Band. Meanwhile, Voyager’s interactive approach remained unchanged from Rainbow Family; the program created its own music while listening closely to the human performer(s) and choosing whether to imitate, oppose, or ignore the sounds they made.

In 2004, Lewis remade the Voyager software so that it could play an acoustic instrument, the MIDI-capable Yamaha Disklavier concert grand piano. Voyager now had at its virtual fingertips an acoustic instrument that could enact the timbral breadth, pitch range, and dynamics of a virtuoso pianist. In an ironic reversal, Voyager’s debut as improvising pianist took place at Carnegie Hall, in Lewis’s 2004 orchestral work Virtual Concerto. Guided by the same intelligence and intuition that characterized the earlier orchestral versions of the program, the many subsequent Voyager performances often involved piano duos with Vijay Iyer, Aki Takase, Alexander von Schlippenbach, Geri Allen—and even with a second Voyager pianist, as part of Spooky Interaction (2014), a telematic four-piano connection between Melbourne and New York with Courtney Bryan, Paul Grabowsky, and two Voyagers.

The CTM Festival performance begins with Mitchell, coaxing a series of squeaks, whistles, and altissimo multiphonics from his soprano saxophone. Soon Lewis joins in, using his MacBook to create layers of samples and synthesized tones that complement Mitchell’s sparse upper-register playing. The two performers develop this texture slowly and deliberately, taking turns introducing new sounds and occasionally dropping out so that the other musician can play unaccompanied. By the fifteen-minute mark, the texture is becoming more active, with a blend of acoustic and electronic timbres that recalls the debut recording of Voyager (Avant, 1993), which featured Mitchell on alto and soprano saxophones. During the next six minutes, the musicians gradually work the texture to a climax. Then Mitchell yields to Lewis, who plays a repeating vocal sample (“unable to continue...”) that signals the end of the saxophone-electronics texture and sets the stage for the middle section of the performance.

The next sound heard is the Voyager-driven acoustic piano. It starts its improvisation with a rhapsodic passage in the key of E-flat major, worlds away from the saxophone-electronics texture that opened the concert. Instead of trying to bridge the gap between the old and new textures, Mitchell and Lewis remain silent for several minutes, allowing Voyager to explore a number of different modes of playing, some of which resonate with the intricate polyrhythms, subtle lyricism, and transcendental sweep of Abrams’s late-period solo piano improvisations. Eventually the (human) musicians return to duet with Voyager: first Lewis on trombone, then Mitchell on alto saxophone. In the duets, it is evident how Lewis and Mitchell’s playing shapes the software’s sonic output—and how Voyager, in turn, influences their improvisations. The interaction grows more complex when Lewis reenters the texture, transforming the Mitchell-Voyager duet into a lively exchange between three equal partners. Here as before, one can detect echoes of the responsiveness and textural palette that characterized performances of The Trio, and at times, one could be forgiven for imagining that Abrams, who himself performed with the Voyager pianist in earlier years, had somehow rejoined the band.

Nearly eight minutes into the trio texture, Mitchell lands on a middle-register long tone. Voyager answers with a crashing chord, followed by a quieter line that reaches upward to the saxophonist’s sustained note. Then Mitchell and Voyager fall silent for a few seconds, giving Lewis an opportunity to intervene. He reaches for his laptop and turns off the Voyager program, but not before it can play one last figure: a low-register tritone that feels like the perfect response to Mitchell’s long tone and everything that led up to it. This is a phenomenon that Lewis would call “emotional transduction”—when Voyager draws from the sounds created by its human partners while preserving both meaning and emotional intent. Moments like this happen in every performance with Voyager, and not at all by chance, even though the software’s behavior is far from predictable. All improvisers, human and otherwise, have to listen to one another, analyze the texture as it unfolds, and choose the kinds of sonic responses that will best serve the music. Voyager always rises to the occasion, especially in performances like the CTM Festival, working with improvisers who share its approach to music-making, one that emerged during the AACM’s first decade and was refined through years of collaborative practice. Like the Association that brought it into being, the AACM’s music is “a power stronger than itself,” a force that never diminishes. Even after Abrams’s passing, the AACM’s chapters in Chicago and New York continue to thrive. And in Berlin, once the Voyager piano fades away, Mitchell and Lewis end the performance with a kind of homecoming, while still advancing the musical dialogue that they began on the South Side in 1971.

Paul Steinbeck,  
St. Louis, November 2018





GEORGE LEWIS, February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018, CTM Festival, HAU Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin, Germany



ROSCOE MITCHELL, February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018, CTM Festival, HAU Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin, Germany



VOYAGER, INTERACTIVE COMPUTER PIANIST, February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018, CTM Festival, HAU Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin, Germany

## GEORGE LEWIS – ROSCOE MITCHELL

ROSCOE MITCHELL  
GEORGE LEWIS

# VOYAGE AND HOMECOMING

2019

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ROSCOE MITCHELL – GEORGE LEWIS

# VOYAGE AND HOMECOMING

GEORGE LEWIS: laptop (1), trombone (2, 3)  
ROSCOE MITCHELL: sopranino (1), alto (2) and soprano (3) saxophones  
VOYAGER: interactive computer pianist (2)

1. <b>Quanta</b> (George Lewis/Roscoe Mitchell)	21:45
2. <b>Voyager</b> (George Lewis)	25:06
3. <b>Homecoming</b> (George Lewis/Roscoe Mitchell)	9:02
<b>TOTAL TIME</b>	57:56

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