

The Book Cooks

Excerpt from

Sound Experiments: The Music of the AACM

Paul Steinbeck

(University of Chicago Press; Chicago and London)

From Chapter 9:

Nicole Mitchell, *Mandorla Awakening II: Emerging Worlds*

Narrative is definitely at the core of my work. – Nicole Mitchell

Nicole Mitchell took a roundabout path into the AACM. Unlike many members of the Association, she was not born or raised in Chicago, and her early investigations of improvisation and composition took place far from the South Side – in San Diego, California, and Oberlin, Ohio. In 1990, when she first tried to connect with the AACM, she was rebuffed, in contrast to many other would be members who were accepted into the Association right away. It would take her five years to gain entry to the AACM. When Mitchell finally joined the Association, in 1995, she represented “the advent of a new generation of AACM musician.” She and Jeff Parker were the first AACM members to be born after the organization was founded. Mitchell came into the AACM’s Chicago chapter with two other women musicians, Maia and Shanta Nurullah. With Maia, Mitchell, and Nurullah in the fold, the formerly male-dominated Chicago chapter finally had a critical mass of women members. Mitchell quickly became a key player in the Chicago chapter, and during the 2000s and 2010s, her leadership helped bring the AACM into the twenty-first century.

Mitchell was born in Syracuse, New York, in 1967. When she was eight, her father (an engineer) moved the family from central New York to Anaheim, California, just outside of Los Angeles in suburban Orange County. The move to California was hard on the Mitchells. Nicole’s mother, a painter and writer, had to leave behind the community of Syracuse-based artists who had supported her creative work. Moreover, the Mitchells were “one of only two black families” in their Anaheim neighborhood, and young Nicole was treated badly by most people she met: “I was chased by white boys who tried to whip me like a slave, got in fights with white girls who taunted me, told by neighbors that I was downgrading their property value, and was constantly referred to as a n- and spat on.” Mitchell found her solace in music. Shortly after she arrived in Anaheim, she started studying piano and viola. But the instrument that she truly wanted to play was the flute. For years, Mitchell begged her parents for a flute, and when she reached the eighth grade, they finally relented, giving her the instrument that she had been dreaming about since elementary school.

In high school, Mitchell divided her time between academics and music, taking honors courses and playing flute in a youth orchestra. She graduated in 1985 and headed to the University of California, San Diego, planning to major in computer science. However, she soon changed her major to music: “I was in the practice rooms ... from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. several times a week, so I figured that’s where my heart is.” Mitchell started attending experimental music concerts on campus, and her flute professors helped her develop her playing technique. But the most influential professor that Mitchell encountered at UC San Diego was the trombonist Jimmy Cheatham, who directed the university’s jazz program. Cheatham invited Mitchell into his courses and shared with her his philosophy of improvisation – or “permutation,” as he would say. He also introduced Mitchell to the renowned flutist James Newton, who later became her private teacher. By 1987, Mitchell was ready to take her musical education to the next level, so she transferred to Oberlin College in Ohio, where she was one of the first students to major in jazz. Unfortunately, Mitchell did not fit in at Oberlin. She did have a few mentors on the faculty, including bell hooks (a professor of African American studies, English, and women’s studies) and the composer Wendell Logan. But Oberlin’s cutthroat “conservatory culture” was not to Mitchell’s liking: “For me, it was about doing my best, but not trying to compete with others.” Mitchell took some time off from Oberlin College and returned to southern California, taking a day job as a welder. She also busked on the streets of San Diego, and used the “nickels, dimes, and quarters” she earned with her flute to pay for weekly lessons with James Newton (then on the faculty at CalArts). In 1989–1990, Mitchell came back to Oberlin, but the atmosphere at the conservatory was no better than before, and she decided against finishing her degree. Instead, she obtained a grant from the Ford and Mellon foundations that would enable her to spend the summer of 1990 studying house music at the Center for

Black Music Research in Chicago. Then she set out for the city that would become her new home. "I got to Chicago," Mitchell remembered, "and I never left."

Mitchell had always wanted to live in Chicago. She spent months long stretches of her childhood there, visiting her maternal grandparents, who lived on the South Side. In 1990, when Mitchell moved to Chicago for good, "it was ... the first time in my life I actually felt like I fit somewhere." On the South Side, she stated, "I was just a regular person":

In Orange County, being one of two black families in the neighborhood ... and not being a kid into sports ... I didn't fit, but [in] Chicago, it's like, "Oh, you must be from Hyde Park." ... I mean, there's more diversity within African American culture there, so it was a lot easier. But most importantly, the arts community ... was really strong, really vibrant, and welcoming. ... So it was exciting, making friends my age that were interested in things I was interested in, and putting projects together.

Mitchell quickly found her way into the South Side arts community. When she completed her summer research project, she applied for a job at Third World Press, the oldest black-owned independent publisher in the United States. Mitchell was immediately hired as an intern, and then became Third World Press's graphic designer, a position she would hold for thirteen years, until 2003. Her next stop was the AACM. She had heard about the Association from Leroy Jenkins, who gave a lecture at Oberlin College during Mitchell's time as a student. One day in 1990, Mitchell looked up the AACM in the Chicago telephone directory and headed to the organization's office – then located on Seventy-First Street, not far from Third World Press's headquarters at Seventy-Fifth Street and South Cottage Grove. She was met at the front door by "a big tall guy," AACM trumpeter Ameen Muhammad:

He's looking at me ... "Yes?" "I want to take lessons in the AACM School." He was like, "No, we're not taking adult lessons right now," and he closed the door.

Mitchell did not walk through the Association's door that day, but she was about to make the connection that would bring her into the AACM.

During her first summer in Chicago, Mitchell worked as a street performer, as she had done in San Diego. "I actually got arrested the first day I played on the street [in Chicago]," she recalled. "They said I was too loud." She soon found a new spot on Wabash Avenue in the downtown Loop district, near the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her performances on Wabash caught the attention of Maia (formerly Sonjia Hubert), an actress, dancer, and multi-instrumentalist who was studying at the Art Institute. Maia introduced herself to Mitchell, and they began practicing flute together. In 1991, they brought another musician into their circle – the bassist-sitarist Shanta Nurullah, who had worked with Maia in a group led by AACM co-founder Philip Cohran. The three women decided to form their own ensemble, which they called Samana. In Samana, all three members sang and played multiple instruments (Mitchell performed on percussion as well as flute), and each contributed original compositions to the band. A few years into the collaboration, Maia became convinced that Samana belonged in the AACM – the city's premier collective of composers and multi-instrumentalists. However, the Chicago chapter of the AACM had not admitted any women since 1981 – when Ann Ward joined the Association – and Maia's application for membership became the subject of a protracted debate. The AACM ultimately accepted Maia's application, with assists from Ward and Ameen Muhammad, who recommended her for membership. Then Maia ushered her Samana bandmates into the organization, beginning with Mitchell, who joined the AACM in 1995. Nurullah was the next to join, and Samana became the first "all-women's ensemble" in the history of the AACM.

Around the time that Samana entered the AACM, Mitchell started working in a trio with percussionist Hamid Drake and vocalist Glenda Zahra Baker. Drake was impressed by Mitchell's musicianship, and he urged her to visit the Velvet Lounge and introduce herself to his mentor, AACM saxophonist Fred Anderson. One evening in 1997, Mitchell paid her first visit to the Velvet Lounge, where she heard Anderson performing with fellow saxophonist Ken Vandermark. In the audience that night was another Chicago woodwind player, David Boykin. By then, Samana had dissolved, as had Mitchell's trio with Hamid Drake. So Mitchell joined Boykin's ensemble, which performed at the Velvet Lounge and elsewhere in the city. She also became a regular at the Velvet Lounge's Sunday night jam sessions, a vital outlet for many Chicago improvisers. During this period, Mitchell was composing more than ever before, and when she asked Boykin if his band would perform her pieces, he suggested that she start her own group. Mitchell had received the same advice from Drake a few years earlier, and now she was ready to take the plunge. "It was out of a desire for the music, not out of any desire to be a bandleader," she explained. "It was empowering to finally play and share this huge stack of compositions that I had ... [after] years of contributing to and supporting other musicians."

Mitchell debuted her new band at the Velvet Lounge in 1998. She called the group the Black Earth Ensemble, a name meant to "honor the feminine source that our lives depend on: Mother Earth." Many

of the ensemble's early members were affiliated with the AACM, including percussionist Avreeayl Ra, bassist Darius Savage, and violinist Samuel "Savoir Faire" Williams. However, the Black Earth Ensemble was never intended to be an all-AACM band. Over the years, Mitchell brought a number of non-AACM musicians into the group, often using a unique configuration of performers for each of the ensemble's projects. According to Mitchell, the Black Earth Ensemble was "a forum for my compositions, so I may have a project where I want all strings, or I may have a project where I want more traditional jazz instrumentation, or a twenty-piece ensemble. ... I think of it like a big family of maybe thirty musicians ... it was always like that from the beginning."

Mitchell worked tirelessly to make the Black Earth Ensemble into one of the top groups in Chicago. She staged concerts across the city and released a series of Black Earth Ensemble albums on Dreamtime Records, the label she co-founded with David Boykin. By the 2000s, the Black Earth Ensemble was performing at major venues in Chicago, recording for commercial labels, and appearing at European jazz festivals. At the same time, Mitchell was taking on an increasingly prominent role in the AACM. She had been teaching at the AACM School of Music and serving on the Association's executive board since the late 1990s. In 2006, she became the first woman to lead the AACM, co-chairing the Chicago chapter with Douglas Ewart (until 2009) before taking over as sole chair (through 2011). During this period, Mitchell recruited several new members into the Association, including violinist Renée Baker, drummer Mike Reed, and cellist Tomeka Reid. "I felt I could be a bridge to bring the younger musicians in and try to close the gap between the generations," Mitchell stated. "Because when I came in, it was just me, and everyone else on the [executive] board was ... fifteen and twenty years older. But the younger musicians, they have a completely different idea of who they are and what music is and what is this 'AACM stuff,' so I'm trying to make that connection."

Building a bridge between the AACM's old guard and fourth-wave members like Baker, Reed, and Reid was not Mitchell's only contribution to the Association. She also forged alliances between the AACM and a number of other organizations – in Chicago and as far away as France. Mitchell found a permanent home for the AACM School of Music, moving the institution to the South Side campus of Chicago State University (where she finished her undergraduate degree in 1998, prior to earning her master's in music from Northern Illinois University). After a 2005 Black Earth Ensemble performance in Paris, she persuaded the French music festivals Sons d'hiver and Banlieues Bleues to present a three-year series of concerts featuring various AACM groups – including the Great Black Music Ensemble performance examined in chapter 7. And Mitchell brought in grant funding that kept the Association on firm financial footing into the 2010s. These achievements made her one of the most effective leaders the AACM ever had. "I felt I was needed," she declared, "to help move the organization forward."

In 2011, when Mitchell was finishing her term as the Chicago chapter's chair, she was offered a faculty position at the University of California, Irvine. The professorship was in a new program called Integrated Composition, Improvisation, and Technology (ICIT) – a "dream job" for Mitchell, who had been "combining the different disciplines" of composition and improvisation since the 1990s. The university's location was also attractive: UC Irvine was just fifteen miles south of Mitchell's childhood home in Anaheim, and her father and brothers still lived nearby. Moreover, two of the professors in the ICIT program (Michael Dessen and Christopher Dobrian) had studied composition with AACM member George Lewis, one of Mitchell's closest mentors. So, in the summer of 2011, Mitchell left Chicago, her home for two decades, and moved back to California. The job at UC Irvine proved to be a perfect fit. Mitchell was promoted to full professor after just two years, an astonishingly fast climb up the academic ladder. Her ICIT colleagues inspired her to explore music technology, and she began to incorporate electronics and video into her improvisations and compositions. Some of Mitchell's sound experiments had their first hearings at UC Irvine, while others were premiered in Chicago, New York, and Europe by the American Composers Orchestra, the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), the Tri-Centric Orchestra (founded by Anthony Braxton), and other top-flight performers. Mitchell also continued to compose for the Black Earth Ensemble, writing new music for the group every year, including a 2015 suite that would become one of her most acclaimed works.

© 2022 The University of Chicago. Used with permission.

> [Order Book Here](#)

> [back to The Book Cooks](#)

> [back to contents](#)