

KL: Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to OTO, welcome to this "In Conversation" with the Art Ensemble of Chicago. I'd like to introduce Famoudou Don Moye -

DM: Hello, good evening.

KL: Roscoe Mitchell.

RM: Thank you, thank you, thank you.

KL: And Hugh Ragin. Gentleman, it was a storming start to the residency on Sunday, a really beautiful gig, and you finished the set with 'Owalla' which is something of an Art Ensemble theme tune really. I know that it goes a long way back. I think the first recorded version that I know of is on the Bap-Tizm album in 1972, I mean maybe it was recorded before that...I don't know when it was written -

DM: It was performed before that. In Paris at the Mutualite Theatre with, was it four bass saxophones?

RM: Two bass saxophones.

DM: Four basses, four drums I think. Two trumpets. Something like that.

KL: Let's talk a bit about the history of that piece then, because it comes back again and again.

RM: Uh yeah, that's a piece that I wrote and we took it on to be our theme song for the Art Ensemble of Chicago, uh, not only that but there's a juice company in the United States who used the title for their juice company called 'Odwalla Juice'. We also did a bunch of jingles for them because they had an idea that they wanted to have their juice in vending machines, but when they first started off the juice was totally local. They did not want to take it anywhere, they wanted to get it to you right from their factory, right to you fresh so you would have it. They wanted to at some point have their juices in vending machines so when you put in your money to get a certain juice then you would hear a jingle, you know, that we'd created for them. So that's Odwalla, yeah.

KL: That's completely floored me [laughs].

DM: And I would add, I would add, we met them at a winter residency in Woodstock, New York. I think it was 1977. We did it two years in a row, a two-week intensive with young students coming from different places in the world, and the people that ran Odwalla came to that workshop. And then they went back, they were selling juice out of their kitchen, they were students at Santa Cruz College, and then they evolved from the local fresh squeezed orange juice from their back porch to having each individual driver as his own vendor, so he was business for himself - they encouraged self-entrepreneurship, and the story went on from there.

KL: I've got to say of all the stories I expected you to say with regards to Odwalla, the fact that it was a jingle was really not the thing that I expected.

RM: I didn't say it was a jingle - I didn't say that. I said that Odwalla Juice Company wanted us to create jingles for the different names of their juices. One was 'Big Red Peaches' for instance -

DM: 'Grape Escape'

RM: Grape Escape.

DM: 'Strawberry Mango'

RM: Strawberry Mango.

DM: 'Lotta Colada' - Pina Colada, you know.

RM: That's what I said. Odwalla's not a jingle.

DM: What happened was they us do 3 different versions, we did a 15 minute morsel and then we did a 30 second morsel and then we did a 1 minute morsel of the music for each juice. And then they would have the option if they wanted to do airplay and different times, they could - we didn't have to edit material, it was already ready.

KL: Yep. And is there a particular art to just composing music in that situation when people have asked you for something which is very specific task, opposed to you just sitting down and writing a piece which could be an hour or an hour and a half?

RM: Of course. I mean we've done music for film also, Les Stances a Sophie, you know that?

KL: For sure.

RM: Yeah ok. We've done that. We've also, the music on that 'Home' record that we never named our own selves - was done for um, it was about canning companies and so on - the movie itself never came out so we've done music for all kinds of different things.

KL: Ok, I'd like to bring in Mr. Ragin at this point because we haven't heard from you. You joined the group in the last few years - I don't know how long you've been playing with them. What has the experience been like? Coming in to what is an institution really, a group that's been going for so many decades.

HR: Well I started as a student with the Art Ensemble when they were in residence at the Woodstock Creative Music Studio and I was a part of a ten-day New Year's Eve intensive, and it started December 26th 1978 and it ended January 4th 1979. After that, so I ended up, Joseph Jarman taught theatre and music class and had us write a piece like that and Roscoe took us through a lot of ensemble improvisation like what we do now, and Lester Bowie took us through rhythm changes, Afrobeat and Reggae. Malachi Favors took us through solo performance and Blues and Moye only saw a handful of horn players at the very end - day 9 and 10 and he presented a concert with his percussion ensemble. That's when I played with Moye. So after that was over, Roscoe said he had a space for me in what would be the Leo Smith Roscoe Mitchell Creative Orchestra and we played at Moers Jazz Festival and we ended up recording in Paris, France. So I'd been listening to the Art Ensemble quite a bit, a real intensified study three years before that and I really felt I had the momentum to actually study with the real people. Lester, I consider him a major mentor on trumpet and I feel like I'm playing the Lester Bowie chair of the Art Ensemble and it's been great fun, it's kinda like a dream come true if you will.

KL: Ok. There's a lot of history that we can talk about and we will talk about, but it's important that we focus on the future, and on the present as well so - tell me about the way that you put together a set list or the way that you prepare for concerts today, or residencies like this one?

RM: Well, I just want to follow up on Hugh first. Hugh was also a member of my Sound Ensemble so we've been playing together for really a long time.

DM: 30 years or something.

RM: Something like that, I don't know. But we do the same thing that we always did, you know. The Art Ensemble was a group that rehearsed 5 days a week, you know, from 9 - 5. We never asked, no one ever asked, 'when is the next rehearsal' or anything, this was our schedule basically, all the way up until the time we went to Europe, we'd been across the States a couple of times, two years in a row, er, California, the first time when we went there we left there and drove out there in Lester Bowie's 1951 Bentley with the steering on the wrong side and two electrical systems and so on and so forth. And it was the time of the hippy movement in Haight Ashbury. I did a recording with Nick Gravenites who was a Blues singer, and when we got out to California he had a place in Mill Valley that he and some others had gotten for Mike Bloomfield, so they gave us that house. And then we went back to California the following year and it was time for us to move on, so Lester Bowie put an ad in the Chicago Defender which is a Black newspaper in Chicago saying 'Musician Sells Out'. What he was actually saying was that he was selling all of his furniture and earthly belongings to bring the band to Europe. What I remember is that that's the way the Art Ensemble survived - it had to become a collective. I always considered myself fortunate to be with five individuals who had a particular vision you know. We still do the same thing - we rehearse, we write music, we study music - speaking for myself I'm more interested in being a student right now than any other time I can think of in my life. It's all ongoing.

KL: What's the relationship between composition and improvisation in your music - how much space do you leave for improvisation?

RM: What I would say to people that want to become good improvisers is they need to study composition and improvisation as a parallel. Because what it really is, on a high level, it's collective composition together, you know. And I would also advise them to study opposites. If there's fast, there's slow. If it's loud, there's soft. You should also practice the art of solo playing, you know. And then you should also practice the art of playing with a lot of people. So what it is, it's a game for people that can think, you know. And actually create composition in real time. I think the world is waiting to see that large ensemble that can really get up on the stage and convincingly play composition in real time.

DM: I was gonna add to that, from my personal approach - currently I'm back to studying more than ever before. Because there's a lot of things as you mature you learn about. You learn about mistakes. You learn what works, and you learn what doesn't work. You learn how to pick people that will enhance the things you're trying to do so that you can continue to go forward. That happens with musicians, professionals - that can also happen with your students. So you have to remain open to various influences. What I do in Marsaille where I live I have a rhythm class that's really rhythm, harmony, melody depending on who the people are involved. We emphasise their strengths to create a piece, and then we emphasise their weaknesses to work on the piece. So inside of that environment everybody gets to go forward, and the ones that aren't willing to make that sacrifice - they don't come back. They leave themselves. So I have a warm up thing, drum set originally but it's adaptable to anybody that comes on any instrument. The first lesson is soft and slow. And then I show them the things written out and they don't make an interpretation, they play it as written. And then the whole cycle takes about 40mins - 20mins is the minimum - and as we evolve through the thing and the people we do other exercises after that, as we evolve through, the people on the piece I encourage them to bring a different approach that will enhance their instrument inside of the exercise I created for myself. Then we go forward like that. That's never been performed, but in essence it is a composition and an exercise and a warm up at the same time. Then you got other things you can use, you can have different exercises, different approaches for different things but like Roscoe was saying, it's a parallel. I never do improvisation until we do a complete warm up section first to see who's in what frame of mind on that particular time. People show up burnt out and the last thing we're gonna try to do is have a class where somebody is not focused you know.

KL: One of the things that's defined the group over the years is the sheer range of instruments that you've used, the fact that everybody's been a multi-instrumentalist. When I was looking at the credits for virtually all the albums every player has their instruments listed, and there's always a little '(etc)' after each one. And then there's the term 'little instruments' - so the amount of instruments that were used seem to be a very key thing

in the development of the group. Was that an express intention or was it a practical thing? Did you just need more sounds?

RM: Well I would say I've definitely interested in creating sounds and so on, but it's nothing new. I mean, if you look at some of the big band books from a long time ago the woodwind section was enormous. I mean, through the later early years when you've got people like Charlie Parker that were very high level of genius on just one instrument, uh, then things keep you bobbing - people go to one thing and go back. I mean, I remember when I first got my bass saxophone there wasn't that many people playing it, but now - there was an era that uh, where it was a very popular instrument - but now you see more and more people wanting to do these kinds of things. But I might hear a note on a saxophone and the next I might be on a bell or something. I study not only the chromatic system, I study what's outside of the chromatic system and I consider like the saxophone for instance - it's one of the most versatile instruments in the ways of being able to do that.

KL: Can you elaborate on why?

RM: Well I mean all you have to do is look up the history of the saxophone and see all the different people that played it and see what they did on the instrument. It's an incredible range of what has been done. But I've heard people who can take you to different places on the piano that make you think, you know, you're not in a chromatic system. Everything is evolving right now, you know, this is a very important period in music. I've seen the time where people are establishing the first computer music conferences in the States - back then, nobody knew what was going on with the computer - if it was going to work or whatever, you know. And now you have people around who can actually play the computer in real time with acoustic instruments too. This period here is almost like the 60's - you have people from all different disciplines in music coming together and you starting to get people that do get together and really rehearse so we're gonna have this high level of music again. Every now and then what music does is it shakes, you know, it shakes the dust off itself and then people that haven't been paying attention - then they're behind. Not only music, in art in general.

KL: Mr. Moye, we're talking about instruments, you've defined your own set, you've called it Sun Percussion. Tell me about how you went about doing that and the range of influences from a lot of non-western music, African music, Caribbean music - tell me about your set up.

DM: Well I started out on the traditional drum set - snare drum playing in drum and bugle chorus and then I met friends when I was younger, some Puerto Rican buddies of mine, that was my introduction to salsa and hand-drumming, and from that situation I've met African musicians from various west and east African countries, and the thing about all of this music is it's a reflection and extension of the language. The music is really the language - traditionally they used drums as a form of communication so that's reflected even today in its traditional forms, the griot tradition, that all comes from the language, music as an extension of the language. As far as the name for Sun Percussion - I was working with a group of percussionists from Chicago that was founded, it was called 'The Sun Drummer' - it was singular because all of the members represented one force which was the drum, so we didn't think of it as plural, we thought of it as a collective effort to present this rhythm that was one thing on a lot of different instruments. As an extension of that and I suppose because of all the different sound worlds because of the Art Ensemble I've then said, 'well my personal thing is not 'Sun Drummer' - I'm 'Sun Percussion', because with the Art Ensemble I get to express myself on all these other instruments. When I joined they had instruments that I didn't even have, percussion instruments I mean. People had different approaches - that's the one I had. Identify your personality inside of the thing, and label it, and then do that.

KL: But the fact that everybody in the group can play percussion in the group - like Mr. Mitchell was saying he might reach for a bell - I mean Lester Bowie used to play a bass drum at times - everybody seemed to have access to percussion instruments. Did that increase the cohesion of the group?

DM: It increased the amount of work we had to do. It's a lot of things, they were serious, people now it's like I see people with a lot of things and it's like they're not studying. They're just going out buying stuff. With the Art Ensemble everybody was dedicated to seriously studying, like Roscoe had drums, he'd play his rudiments every day, worked on his footwork, you know that's what you have to do. In traditional musical cultures you can't just jump up and play an instrument. Who you gonna play with? Whose gonna let you do that? So all the instruments that Lester and everybody had, by the time I joined they were already studying percussion on their own and with the other drummers. Intrinsic, inside the tradition of our music a lot of the important innovators were percussionists and rhythm masters in their own right. When you think of Duke Ellington, Lewis Armstrong, Dizzie Gillespie, Lewis Jordan all these guys - as a drummer, you learn how to interpret what other people are doing from the rhythmic sensibility that the soul always has - not from drummers. Drummers don't tell you how to play with other people - the people who you play with tell you what they want you to do, and that's how you develop your sense of phrasing and timing.

KL: I think we should go into some of the history of the group because it's really important. We've mentioned France - Paris was very important I think in the development of the group, these residencies when you went to Paris in the late 60's. I've got one of the first albums you recorded for Actuel BYG, 'AACM, Great Black Music Message To Our Folks' - what can you tell me about this session? In Paris, 1969 I believe. How did it come about?

RM: Well that's not the first record. Our first recording sessions were with Pathe - we did People in Sorrow and The Spiritual. These records came later. A Jackson in Your House was the first one, but that picture comes from our place north of Paris, and the way we got there because Claude Delcloo had started to write the AACM and expressed a wish to have musicians to come over there, and that's what inspired Lester Bowie to sell all of his furniture and possessions to take the band to Europe. And as a matter of fact, when we got there Lester and his family lived at the Pac Hotel in the Left Bank and the band stayed at Maison Blanche which was the mental hospital in Paris because one of the doctors there was a trumpet player and a friend of Claude Delcloo. And the session at Pathe gave us money to get our place where that was taken. So um, I think it was Malachi that came up with the name for that one. And as for BYG, yeah that was recorded at Studio Saravah.

KL: How important was it to actually have the AACM name there?

RM: Well we are AACM. The AACM is a family. When we left Chicago we carried the banner of the AACM with us. 2015 was the 50th anniversary of the AACM. 2019 is the 50th anniversary of the Art Ensemble of Chicago. The Art Ensemble of Chicago became. The Art Ensemble of Chicago upon our arrival in Paris in 1969.

KL: I understand the AACM also really valued study and gave lessons to anyone who wanted to learn music, that there was a real emphasis on sharing, on education, for anyone who was serious. Is that how you saw the organisation functioning?

RM: What it was is, the reason why the AACM came into being is because it was an outgrowth of the Muhal Richard Abrams Experimental Band, you know, and this is where people started talking about having more control over their own destinies, so we had certain fundamentals, purposes, and one of them was to sponsor young aspiring musicians in the company, to promote each members in concerts of their own composition, to have exchange programs with musicians - we encouraged musicians from other cities to form organisations that were similar to ours. One I could mention is BAG in St Louis which Lester's younger brother Joseph was in. I think some of our first concerts were exchange programs there. And I tell people now, today, don't let anybody define you, you look at you want to do and if it's not happening and you want to do it then you should go about trying to find a way to do it because you would be surprised at how many people would help you if you present a good idea to them. That's what happened with us. We carried the AACM banner with us then, and we carrying it with us now.

KL: Can you tell us a bit about the Black experience in Chicago, how it used to be?

DM: How it *is* - *is*. I could say a lot. There's a whole organisation of police officers up in Chicago that are musicians. We had captains, sergeants, you'd see them at the show and then in their uniform going to work with their horn in the backseat or something. We had professional musicians but they weren't making enough money to make a living so they'd come straight from work to the show.

KL: Was it a difficult city to live in?

RM: No, not for me. I come from Chicago, when I was growing up, it was so clean that people used to put out buckets to catch snow and make ice cream out of it. Everybody had a garden in Chicago. Ok? You didn't have to leave your neighborhood to make a living. Ok? So we watched the thing evolve that is not very pleasant, but that doesn't say that, like, people need to get together and like, take it back. I was listening to Moor Mother, and she was talking about, 'we want our future back' so, what are people gonna do? I mean. This is what, I think we're kind of an example of what can be done when people strive to take control of their own destinies. It all goes by fast, we only have a certain amount of time to react to stuff.

KL: So very much self-empowerment. You take control of your music, take control of the means of production and you get on with things. Can we talk about theatre and its relevance to the Art Ensemble? For example, I'm holding the cover of 'The Art Ensemble of Chicago With Fontella Bass'. There's a very strong image here - why do you do the face paint, the presentation?

DM: Me personally? Well Joseph and Malachi were doing it, Roscoe occasionally did, even Lester sometimes. That's what that was, I vibed on that. I got a feeling inside of my connection to my indigenous peoples and I saw ritual, I said hmm, I can express my roots. I vibed on my feelings about my roots, and part of the face paint and costume was reflecting that, but I did have a 3 piece suit too - silk shirt, tie, you know, Stacey Adam shoes, Stetson hat - that's all part of it.

KL: Mr. Ragin, we haven't heard from you in a while. When you saw the record sleeves and the presentation of the Art Ensemble, how did resonate with you?

DM: I think like Mr. Moye said, I saw individuals, and everybody has a distinct look and a way of presenting themselves. I see it in the pictures, I hear it in the music, and I just really thought everything was pretty natural you know, it didn't, I didn't really see it as theatre I just saw it as individuals expressing themselves. That one [The Art Ensemble of Chicago With Fontella Bass] is a very striking album there, I like it a lot, cause it says a lot - every individual has a story right there and they're coming together as one. That's really what I liked about it. The community.

KL: An important part of this album let's not forget is Fontella Bass the singer who was married to Lester Bowie.

HR: Yeah I've worked with Fontella with David Murray and we had a Gospel ensemble, and Fontella is pretty fantastic. I really, I knew her first through 'Rescue Me' her hit, and the fact that she was married to Lester just kind of showed the diversity that was expected of the AACM and she represented that too. So yeah, Fontella's spirit is there too.

KL: She was a great Gospel singer as well as an R'n'B singer.

DM: Family, great gospel family - her mother was 60 years more and more at the top of the tradition of Gospel, and then her brother David was a highly accomplished in Gospel and R'n'B, and he was involved in musical productions, and acting too, but his real talent was vocal. The whole family was in that tradition.

KL: So the description of your music that you came up with, 'Great Black Music: Ancient to Future' - it really was a question of going as far back as you could into the music, making sure that everything could be represented and establishing a continuum with the present and the future, so presumably a form of music like Gospel or Negro Spirituals as they were called, that would have been very important to you as well.

DM: Yeah well, what happens is all of that transcends the labels, the flavour of the week, the flavour of the year and we say 'wait a minute, wait a minute.' Part of my commitment is to label what we're doing as clearly, as distinctively as possible so then you can really truly reflect yourself. So if you wanna label your own thing you can represent that - or you can let some critic make up a term, or maybe you want to let them give you a name. I was proud to be a part of something where people had assumed that responsibility - clarifying "this is what it is - it is not that, it is not that, it is this, it will remain this until we tell you differently. Period." And that's the end of that.

KL: I think that's very well said. Malachi Favors on the record tribute to Lester said that you had a debate for many hours on what to call the music, that this question of labelling was difficult because the word 'jazz' itself was contentious, many people have rejected it, that finding labels for music is difficult. Can you take us back to that moment when you were thinking about what to call the music, how do you define it and how you came to the conclusion 'Great Black Music: Ancient to Future'.

RM: Well it's true you know. It's not a big issue. I mean like, just start listening to the music. You know I just looked at a video of Jessye Norman? Wow. That's great. And I could go on calling out names. Jackie McLean. Hank Mobley. I mean it's great.

KL: So define it as you hear it.

DM: What are you gonna call that, they gotta have all these different names and different eras [laughs]. Hold it, hold it, boom, one thing, thank you very much.

KL: And was it also important to you to call the music art, to not just call it a quartet or a quintet and just say this is, this is art.

RM: Well that's true, it is true, it is art. Art Blakey. [laughs]

DM: Art Tatum!

KL: Was that the secret code?

DM: Art Taylor!

KL: Inside the Art Ensemble of Chicago there was a coded reference to Art Blakey -

DM: Arturo Sandoval!

KL: All of the arts in one. I just have one more question. What are the next steps you're planning to take? As you say there's an anniversary coming up, can we expect more residencies?

RM: Yes, we're working on a new studio recording, we're just starting to put that together. the group that will be doing the tour with us, it's a rather large group, well we have some of the players here. What we've been doing is we're gradually pulling the ensemble together but it will include a string quartet, three basses, there will be two other horns, we're adding woodwinds, Nicole Mitchell with the group.

KL: Who is fantastic - great. Thanks so much. It's been a real pleasure – Mr. Don Moye, Mr. Roscoe Mitchell, Mr. Hugh Ragin. Thank you.