



Donald Byrd (centre) with local musicians in Nis, Serbia 2007

a method to playing fast. Donald said, 'That's because you have never heard yourself play fast.' He told me to write out 8-12 choruses of improv and write it out as a practice, not to play on a gig but just to conceive hearing my ideas at speed. The next night I improvised on 'Cherokee' and did fine.

When I moved to New York I lived with Donald on a hide-a-bed in the living room of his Bronx apartment for three years. My first recording for Blue Note was (Byrd's) Royal Flush (1961). Not long after, Donald told me I should record as a leader. I was only 21 and thought he was crazy. He told me to tell Alfred Lion I was going to be drafted in the army and needed my own date. He insisted I tell Alfred I had my own publishing company, even though it wasn't true, and that I would record all originals. When I told Alfred this he said, 'then we can't give you your own date, because Blue Note publishes all the music it puts out.' At that point, like Donald told me, I made for the door and just as I touched the handle, Alfred called out, 'Let's talk about this.'

Donald introduced me to Mongo Santamaria who recorded 'Watermelon Man' from Taking Off (1962). There were 250 versions of that track worldwide that year and with my first royalty check Donald took me to purchase my AC Cobra kit car. With that light chassis, it was so fast, I was afraid of it, so he drove it back to the Bronx and I followed in his Jaguar!

Donald Byrd took me under his 'wings' and got me qualified to join Miles Davis. Even though I was with him at the time, when Miles called he told me to say I wasn't working with anybody. With the Blackbyrds, Donald set the trend that led to the Headhunters, Weather Report, Return to Forever and John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra. He wanted the music to reach a wider audience; my feeling is, if nobody does that then the music is going to die."

#### NICOLE MITCHELL

"I had just transferred to Oberlin (1987) and hardly knew anything, except that I wanted to play jazz, but (Byrd) invested in me

anyway, he cared. He told me 'You don't know much right now, but maybe some of this stuff I'm showing you will sink in.' There was a small cadre of us that he would meet at 11pm when the conservatory was closing. We'd go up to one of the classrooms and work with him until 3am, going over chord progressions mostly; more memorable were the life lessons. He talked about his time at Howard University, about starting the Blackbyrds and bringing up Herbie (Hancock) and Bobbi (Humphrey). He warned me the 'woman thing' was a bigger problem than the 'race thing' and I needed to be ready to deal with that if I wanted to be serious in the music. What was really inspiring was he had a pilot's license and would go flying from a nearby town right outside campus. He was probably my first example of someone who was 'free' - who lived life the way he wanted, pursued his interests and didn't worry what other people thought about him."