

NEVER PAT A BURNING DOG

TEXT AND PHOTO BY MICHAEL JACKSON

FLAUTIST/COMPOSER/MERCURIAL TALENT Nicole Mitchell needs little introduction to these pages but since it can be safely guaranteed she'll be hatching something new, she always makes good copy. JazzGram caught up with Mitchell just before she ran off to a gig at Wicker Park's Heaven Gallery, then cut town for an educational residency in Vancouver, directing a big band of students from across British Columbia.

For some years Mitchell has been trailblazing innovative projects in Chicago and beyond but this year is special, since she'll act as artist-in-residence at her hometown jazz fest.

Mitchell's house in Roseland on the far Southside of the city is terra firma, a place where she can get to grips with the myriad tasks at hand. As a fiercely self-motivated creative force, most of those tasks are self-imposed: Mitchell is attempting more than any such guest artist at CJF, with at least five concerts in the works.

These include a duo debut with pianist/composer Anthony Davis (Thurs Sept 2, 5 p.m., Roosevelt University, Ganz Hall); the premiere of *Arc of O*, a new philosophical/spiritual investigation featuring the eighteen-piece Black Earth Orchestra (Friday Sept 3, 7:10–8:10 p.m., Millennium Park); Sonic Projections with Craig Taborn, David Boykin, and Chad Taylor, who recorded last year's marvelously fertile *Emerald Hills* on the French *Rogue Art* label (Sept 4, 3:30–4:30 p.m., Jazz and Heritage Stage, Grant Park); a concert by her students from Chicago High School of the Arts (Sept 4, noon–12:30 p.m. at CHIARTS); and finally, a collaboration entitled *Mother Nature* featuring the Black Earth Ensemble octet with brilliant harpist Edmar Castaneda (Sept 5, 1:10–2:05 p.m., Jazz on Jackson Stage, Grant Park). Mitchell's ambitions seem dauntingly wide-reaching and the front room of her home—populated with art pieces, including her mother's paintings; classic twelve inch jazz vinyl; well-thumbed books; stacks of handwritten manuscript; drums and a keyboard with nearby laptop (not to mention flutes)—functions as an ad hoc HQ for all this activity.

As if a wildcard were needed, she also has a lively new puppy, Coco Bella, to deal with.

JAZZGRAM: *This Arc of O concept sounds intriguing, what is the genesis of the idea?*

NICOLE MITCHELL: It came out of the desire to compose from a concept rather than a narrative, which is what I have been doing with the Octavia Butler work (Mitchell's *Xenogenesis* project). Although many stories inspired me relating to the Arc of O, I was trying to get to the definitive ONE THING, the CORE of everything, in a sense. "O" seems complete and universal; and the arc is all we see, because we never see the complete thing (we're too small to see it). Really it's probably a spiral, but I wanted to draw connections between rotation and orbits of the planetary system and the cycles of life and our own daily rituals. I'm also fascinated with the question of how cycles, circles, and wholeness relate to this idea of "duality" that we humans seem fixated on (day and night, black and white, right and wrong, etc). I don't get the relationship. But with having a double ensemble (duality) and making each one a whole or circle (two ensembles, two circles—physically, musically, conceptually)—it's like I'm conducting a scientific experiment.

JG: *You are especially excited about your duo with Anthony Davis.*

NM: I was hooked on Davis well before I met him... I saw him play solo at the Banlieues Bleues Festival in Paris and it was completely inspiring. I really admire Anthony Davis, I feel he's taken creative music to an extremely high level... His opera work is amazing and he has his own unique way of exploring improv in large compositional works.

JG: *You utilized harpist Maia in your tribute suite to Alice Coltrane a while back, now harpist Edmar Castaneda, what is your particular attraction to the instrument?*



PHOTO: MICHAEL JACKSON

NM: I don't know if there is anyone that doesn't feel the beauty of the harp, it's just gorgeous and silencing. Delicate, precise, clear. I guess I'm a wannabe harpist. I play Egyptian lap harp on Frequency's album (with Ed Wilkerson, Harrison Bankhead, and Avreeayl Ra) and also on my hard-to-find *Duo on Deer Island*. When I heard Edmar I thought he was incredible. He's incorporated his native Columbian tradition with a rhythmically African approach. It echoes the use of the kora in West Africa.

JG: *There is a whole new undercurrent of ideas beneath you and David in Sonic Projections with Chad and Craig knee deep in the mix.*

NM: That project came out of George's [Lewis] AACM book party in New York when I met Chad and Craig.

It's healthy to meet new musicians and challenge yourself in new configurations. Craig is one of my biggest inspirations right now musically. I always loved Chad's work from when he played in the David Boykin Outet.

JG: *You've been fêted far and wide by now, what is special about this invitation from the Chicago Festival?*

NM: It's a huge huge honor!! It really makes me feel appreciated and is also a challenge because I want to make the best of the experience and push myself to develop more though the premieres at the festival. That's why I conceived the *Arc of O* which seems incredibly difficult. It's also a chance to thank all the musicians that have worked with me over the years, although sadly it's not possible to work with every single person! ■