

# WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 28 June 2022 7.30pm

**Roscoe Mitchell** saxophone

**Dudù Kouate** percussion

**Simon Sieger** trombone, tuba

**Kikanju Baku** percussion



London Contemporary Music Festival

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Roscoe Mitchell may be one of the most important figures in contemporary free improvisation. But it's not a title he would be comfortable with himself. 'I don't like that word "free"; he said in a recent interview with *VAN* magazine. 'It's not free. People use that to try and put you in a particular category.' For Mitchell, music is a science, a 'personal mathematics', and a system of systems. His frequent sparring partner Joseph Jarman once said that in the Art Ensemble of Chicago, the legendary group co-founded by Mitchell in the late 60s, Lester Bowie played the scientist, Jarman and Malachi Favors were the shamans of the group, while Mitchell himself was the professor. With his sharply tailored tweed suits and deadpan expression, it's easy to see why. But in concert, Mitchell can reveal a singular warmth and playfulness beneath that poker face. Whether appearing as bandleader or soloist, composer or improviser, Mitchell's is one of the most distinctive voices in music today. With well over 200 recordings to his name, including collaborations with Pauline Oliveros, Evan Parker, George E Lewis, Brigitte Fontaine and countless others, few can match Mitchell's range, his far-reaching curiosity, his dedication to his craft.

Born in Chicago in 1940, Mitchell grew up at a time when the city was rich with music. Even going to the cinema, he recalls, the end credits would roll 'and all of a sudden there's Duke Ellington's big band on the stage playing.' Mitchell was a sponge for new sounds in those days, loitering under the windows of neighbourhood musicians while they were practicing, tuning in to McKie Fitzhugh's *All Night Roundup* show on WOPA, and poring over his older brother Norman's collection of 78 records. Earlier in the century, the Great Migration had seen New Orleans musicians like Sidney Bechet and King Oliver head north to the Windy City, fleeing from racist violence and seeking new opportunities, adapting their playing style to northern tastes in the process. Meanwhile, local musicians like Gene Krupa and Benny Goodman were pushing jazz in exciting new directions: harder, faster, more solos, more fire. As a teenager, Mitchell recalls seeing John Coltrane and Dexter Gordon at McKie's Disk Jockey Show Lounge on the first floor of the Strand Hotel on Cottage Grove Avenue. Gordon, Mitchell remembers, 'happened to need a rubber band for his horn because a spring broke and I happened to have a rubber band. I gave him a rubber band.'

After a stint in the army (stationed in Germany alongside none other than Albert Ayler), Mitchell returned to Chicago in 1961 and quickly fell in with a group of musicians attending Wilson Junior College, including future Art Ensemble members Jarman and Favors, plus Anthony Braxton, Henry Threadgill, and Jack DeJohnette. 'We had one free period a week and we organised a session where we would be playing,' Mitchell recalls. 'It just kind of went on from there.' Around the same time, pianist and composer Muhal Richard Abrams started a regular session at the C&C Lounge.

In a profile of Abrams in her new book *Sound Within Sound*, Kate Molleson describes it as a 'Monday night laboratory where [musicians] tested out, tried out, ventured new sounds in front of no audience at all.' They called it the Experimental Band. It was DeJohnette who first introduced Mitchell to the Band. 'When I went down there,' he recalls, 'they welcomed me with open arms.'

But despite the wealth of talent, it was also a tough time for musicians in Chicago. The newfound popularity of DJs was reducing opportunities for working bands and a new license recently brought in for clubs hosting live music was prone to discriminatory enforcement on the part of city authorities, which only made it harder for players to find a gig. 'We wanted to be in control of our destinies,' says Mitchell. It was for this reason that several of the musicians who had found a home in Muhal's Experimental Band decided in 1965 to come together, forming a new organisation called the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. Nearly 60 years later, that organisation is still going strong, providing a home for some of the brightest voices on the contemporary scene, from Matana Roberts to Jeff Parker, Tomeka Reid and Ben LaMar Gay.

In many ways, the Art Ensemble of Chicago was the archetypal AACM group – so much so that concert promoters sometimes mistakenly acted as if they were just two names for the same entity. In the words of composer and AACM biographer George Lewis, 'The Art Ensemble of Chicago was one of the AACM ensembles that most radically exemplified the collective conception of the AACM as a whole.' All decision-making was handled collectively in regular meetings – and it's to this way of working that Mitchell attributes the group's success and longevity 'because it was perceived as a unit,' he claims in Lewis's book *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, 'and you had to deal with it as a unit.' In 2019, the Ensemble celebrated its 50th anniversary with a world tour and a new album called *We Are On The Edge*, including guests such as Moor Mother and Nicole Mitchell.

Since the heady days of the 60s and 70s, Mitchell has expanded his practice in several directions: from compositions for a wide variety of instrumental forces, to collaborations with figures from the world of new music like Pauline Oliveros and Thomas Buckner, to an extended stint as Darius Milhaud Chair of Composition at Mills College in the San Francisco Bay Area. For tonight's performance, Mitchell will be performing with Senegalese percussionist Dudù Kouate, French trombone and tuba player Simon Sieger and UK-based drummer Kikanju Baku.

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