

Nicole Mitchell

Finding a New Utopia

BY KURT GOTTSCHALK

PHOTO COURTESY OF ARTIST



Utopian visions are hard things to transmit. Like the purest of love songs, a description of utopia can all too easily be heard as naïve, simplistic, even corny. It's up to the dreamer to sell the ideal.

Composer and flutist Nicole Mitchell dreams big. It says a lot about her spirit that she can take inspiration from the noted science fiction author Octavia A. Butler—whose dystopic novels of societal divisions won her Hugo and Nebula awards and a MacArthur Fellowship—to create her own, perfect world.

Followers of Mitchell's have known of the existence of her dream-world at least since the 2017 album *Mandorla Awakening II: Emerging Worlds*. But *Mandorla* was a hard place to see, remote maybe, or under cloud cover. It wasn't described, not overtly anyway, in the music she composed for her Black Earth Ensemble. But it was suggested and, as it turns out, it was also there in the way the band worked together.

Mitchell has now provided a clearer look into her idealized world with her first book, *The Mandorla Letters*, a hybrid of philosophy, reflection on current anxieties and glimpses of the imagined land through the eyes of a heroine earthling who finds herself there, wherever it is. The beautifully designed and bound book (published by the University of Minnesota Press) matches Mitchell's multiple through-lines. Printed in soft indigo ink, the fonts and page orientation shift as the narrative perspectives change, as if one book could barely contain all the ideas so they had to pack it carefully.

"There are a lot of different voices in the book, so it could easily be linearly done, each one being its own book," she said in a Zoom call from France. "I wanted the message to be holistic, which is why it's woven in a mosaic like that, because I feel that it gives more opportunity for you to open your mind in different ways versus if the narrative was a straight narrative. What I would hope is that not just myself but other people could take that seed idea and develop their own narratives."

Mitchell has, in fact, opened *Mandorla* up for others to run free. In 2014, while on the faculty of the University of California, Irvine, she designed a class in which she guided her graduate students in the creation of their own realizations of *Mandorla* through film, dance and music. And the collaborative nature of her compositions for the project allows the members of her ensemble to envision their own *Mandorlian* societies. She is a generous landlord.

She hasn't had the opportunity to have students create *Mandorla* worlds in recent years, however. Mitchell left UC Irvine in 2019 and has been on the move ever since. She spent three years as the William S. Dietrich II Chair and director of jazz studies at the University of Pittsburgh before accepting a professorship at the University of Virginia in 2022, which was promptly followed by a sabbatical in Paris and then a planned residency at Oberlin College. But as soon as she's able to stake ground in Virginia, it will be something of a homecoming. Her grandparents lived near Richmond, where the university is located, before relocating to Chicago in the 1920s; and Mitchell has been crossing and retracing family lines herself. Born in Syracuse, NY she grew up in Anaheim, CA, a short distance from Irvine, studied at Oberlin and

made her way to Chicago, where she first made her mark as a musician. Those early musical experiences, as well as learning the racial codes in different cities across the country, are another subtext of *Letters*.

The original *Mandorla* concert program, with video and light design, and the follow-up *Emerging Worlds* concerts and recording "are just two possible imaginings of the *Mandorla* Island concept and narrative," she writes in *Letters*. "That's why I invite others to explore the MA [*Mandorla Awakening*] concept to create their own possibilities for including and collaborating with musicians from varying traditions... a living sonic experiment of people practicing a musical coexistence while celebrating cultural and gender diversity and exercising a collaborative (intrinsically less hierarchical) platform to improvisation."

Another way of looking at *Mandorla* might be as a state of mind. Mitchell's solo album *Duo with Deer Isle* was recorded in Maine in 2005 and made available through her Bandcamp page in January. Duets incorporate sounds of the island (water plays a starring role), and she is heard interacting with the environment on flutes and percussion instruments, as well as singing and playing an Egyptian harp. Even if it predates the *Mandorla* project, coexistence with the natural world is central to that vision.

In *Letters*, she writes about the music of the natural world, and what we might learn from it:

There is a call and response utilized by most wildlife in nature. Birds return another bird's song in their reply, as if to say, "I hear you!" but with added embellishments. And so, together/not together is a way for us as musicians to play a similar statement, while overlapping our voices imperfectly, so that each texture and individual is heard.

together/not together expresses my sense of coexistence in diversity. Rather than the "melting pot" concept of the '70s, where people were expected to give up their ways of being (assimilate) to reach an impossible white standard, diversity coexistence is about people being respected for their differences as they are.

People peacefully co-existing with one another is also foundational to the *Mandorlian* philosophy. When she set about expanding her Black Earth Ensemble for the *Mandorla* material, she was looking to represent a coming together of Black American, Japanese, Middle Eastern and European cultures. Adding another layer, she writes that she saw the electric guitar and electronics in the ensemble as representing urban life while the oud, shamisen, shakuhachi and banjo represented the rural. "I've been unintentionally doing this the whole time," she said. "I wanted there to be intercultural collaboration... The way I frame the project when I work with people is a world that loves—can we embrace and overlap wisdom from all the places that it exists and how we receive wisdom from outside the western complex? The answers are already there."

Some parts of Mitchell's other worlds will be on display in her Composer Portrait concert at Miller Theatre this month. Mitchell's flute will be heard, of course, but the program commendably puts the focus on her work as a composer, featuring performances by members of the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE). Also

present will be singer Lisa E. Harris, with whom Mitchell composed the 2020 album *EarthSeed*, inspired by Octavia Butler's writings.

Using music to represent a just society is nothing new in jazz, of course. Such modeling was arguably a central tenet to the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), the seminal Chicago collective founded in 1965. Mitchell served as the organization's first female president (from 2009 to 2010) and has played with many of its illustrious elders, including as member of the expanded Art Ensemble of Chicago and with Anthony Braxton. In *Letters*, she writes that "the most crystallized expression of nonhierarchical performance I've ever experienced was as a member of Anthony Braxton's 12+1tet," playing his Ghost Trance Music.

"Braxton's model for GTM is a true embodiment of communitarianism, where the total expression of a concert depends on the organized expression of small units of musicians performing as self-governing communities," she writes. "[I]t represents a democratic embodiment of musical teamwork that completely eradicates the Western concept of hierarchy within musical performance."

As a performer, whether in her own ensembles or in those led by others, Mitchell exudes sincerity. It's there in her broad smile any time she's onstage. It's that sincerity that ties the disparate threads of her book together and it's that sincerity that she brings to her music, to flipping the dystopian switch and finding a new utopia. Asked if she's optimistic about the future, she paused, and seemed to pick her words carefully. "I have hope," she said. "We can't really exist without it, but we have to make some changes."

"Look at what's happening now in California," she added, referencing the latest in America's unending series of mass shootings, with perhaps more faith in the planet than the species. "I don't really think that we're damaging the Earth. We might not survive. Sometimes music doesn't feel like enough. But we all have the power to imagine." Then, as if concerned about leaving on a negative note, she described an open jam she had recently attended in Paris: "It wasn't a bar, any age could come, it was free and they were just doing grooves," she said. "Everyone was dancing, nobody was sitting down. There was a real feeling of non-hierarchy without that machismo judgment vibe. It made me hopeful to see so many people excited about the music."

For more info, visit nicolemitchell.com. Mitchell is at Miller Theatre Mar. 30. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Nicole Mitchell's Black Earth Ensemble — *Xenogenesis Suite* (Firehouse 12, 2007)
- Nicole Mitchell's Black Earth Strings — *Renegades* (Delmark, 2008)
- Nicole Mitchell's Ice Crystal — *Aquarius* (Delmark, 2012)
- Nicole Mitchell — *Engraved in the Wind* (Rogue Art, 2012)
- Nicole Mitchell's Sonic Projections — *The Secret Escapades of Velvet Anderson* (Rogue Art, 2013)
- Artifacts — *...and then there's this* (Astral Spirits, 2022)