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JAZZ

Relishing time on their own, together

■ Roscoe Mitchell and Joseph Jarman of Art Ensemble will play duets, solos at the Ford.



Innovator
(www.soundnet.org)

By Josef Woodard, Special to The Times

Normally, when Roscoe Mitchell and Joseph Jarman appear on the same bill, they are working under the umbrella identity of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, the legendary, category-smashing group formed in 1969. But when the veteran saxophonists (and multi-instrumentalists) appear in a rare double-bill at the Ford Amphitheatre on Sunday, part of the experimental "sound." concert series, they'll leave the ensemble at home and play in solo and duet formats, mixing structured and purely improvised music.

That doesn't mean that Art Ensemble hallmarks won't be in the house. Loosely speaking, Mitchell, 66, and Jarman, 69, have been notable figures in the avant-garde jazz sector for decades, but they often include theatrical and ritualistic elements, and even patches of R&B and gospel.

Mitchell, who often appears, deceptively, as the neatly dressed "straight man" of the AEC, has built percussion instruments, which he'll bring to the Ford along with woodwinds. Jarman, usually adorned in African garb and face paint, tends to incorporate dance and martial arts in his performance palette. Suffice to say, Sunday's concert will be left of center.

The Art Ensemble has been "considered a jazz group, an avant-garde group, a free jazz group, an African jazz group, all the [descriptions] that they use," Jarman says on the phone from his Brooklyn home. "But actually," he adds, "it's just 'ancient to the future,'" citing the group's long-standing motto.

Of late, Jarman has appeared in Los Angeles for different reasons, as part of a 2003 "sound." concert at the Schindler House, with Henry Grimes and Alex Cline, and also at the Higashi Honganji Buddhist Temple (he became a Shinshu Buddhist priest in 1990). Jarman has balanced his musical and spiritual energies in recent years, after breaking away from public musical life for much of the '90s. "The music started coming back to me, so I got back into it," he says.

Playing solo has been an active pursuit for Mitchell for decades. On recordings, his solo work goes back to his 1968 album "Congliptious," and continues through his three-disc "Solo 3" in 2004. On the phone from his home in Madison, Wis., Mitchell explains that "to become a good improviser, you have to be able to play in solo contexts, as well as in contexts with other people. With me, it's just another way of studying the form."

Solo saxophone is a rarely navigated world, but Mitchell doesn't view his work in an instrument-specific way. "I like to explore sounds," he says. "I feel I'm most successful when I'm playing a concert and it doesn't necessarily seem like I'm playing a saxophone but am coming off more like an orchestra or something like that."

Mitchell and Jarman met while studying music at Chicago's Wilson Junior College and also played in pianist-composer Muhal Richard Abrams' adventurous big band. At the time, various forward-thinking Chicago musicians were drawn together through what Mitchell calls "the common interest of wanting to explore other musical forms" beyond just jazz.

Collective energy, and the desire to create their own opportunities, led to the formation of the Assn. for the Advancement of Creative Music in 1965. According to Jarman, the AACM was formed "because there wasn't much work if you didn't want to play bebop. And then we all got inspired by [John] Coltrane and Miles [Davis] and [Eric] Dolphy, the whole bunch." A model of self-reliance, the AACM is still an active organization and has also inspired other groups and efforts, in jazz and other genres. "We're committed to basically the same things that we were committed to then," Mitchell says of the AACM creed, "studying and working hard on our music, writing music and coming together to do concerts."

Though periodically separated professionally and geographically, Mitchell and Jarman have been seeing more of each other in recent years, mainly in the AEC. The group has continued after the deaths of trumpeter Lester Bowie in 1999 and bassist Malachi Favors in 2004. For several years, Jarman was missing from the ensemble, but the band is back in action now, with impressive young trumpeter Corey Wilkes and bassist Jaribu Shahid filling the emptied chairs. The group has released a double album, "Non-cognitive Aspects of the City," recorded live at Manhattan's Iridium.

"We're just doing what we always said we would do within the Art Ensemble," Mitchell says. "We said it would go on even if it got down to one person."

"It's going to go on and on," Jarman agrees, "because when it started out, it was extraordinary, and it's still extraordinary for all of us. Of course, I often think of Lester and Malachi, but the new trumpet player and bass player are nice young men, so it moves forward."

For Mitchell and Jarman, working in the margins of jazz — and, in Mitchell's case, also the contemporary classical field — comes naturally. Mainstream acclaim was never a goal.

"One of my friends recently said to me, 'Wait a minute, too many people are starting to understand you,' " Mitchell says with a laugh. "What we do is study music across the board. I feel that in order to learn as much about music as I would like to learn, I would need more than one lifetime.

"I'm into something that definitely does require your attention, and with that, you're not going to run out of things to do. You're never going to be the master of music."

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Roscoe Mitchell and Joseph Jarman

Where: Ford Amphitheatre, 2580 Cahuenga Blvd. East, Hollywood

When: 7 p.m. Sunday

Price: \$25; \$18 for members of the Society for the Activation of Social Space Through Art and Sound; \$12 for students

Info: www.FordAmphitheatre.org