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J. R. Mitchell



Photo by Charles Stewart

CREATIVE SURVIVAL

by Scott K. Fish

J.R. Mitchell is a multi-faceted human being. On the surface, he might seem to be "just" a drummer. But in reality, J.R. is a composer, an educator, a record company owner/producer and—in his own way—a philosopher. He holds a B.A. in Applied Instruments (percussion) from Combs College of Music, and a Master's degree in Composition from the New England Conservatory. His record label is Doria Records in New York City, and he's released several live albums of his own J.R. Mitchell Universal Ensemble, as well as albums of other artists.

His versatility as a musician covers mainstream jazz to avant-garde (referred to as "creative music" by J.R.), and he's performed or recorded with such jazz giants as Sonny Stitt, Betty Carter, Nina Simone, Ernie Wilkins, Ray Copeland, Byard Lancaster, Jaki Byard, Jackie McLean, Charlie Rouse and Tommy Flanagan.

SF: I see that you have a copy of Valerie Wilmer's book, *As Serious As Your Life*. Valerie mentions you in that book. One thing that's always seemed very obvious—and it comes through in that book—was in relation to musicians who have chosen to play avant-garde music. There's a lot of bitterness about not being able to make a living at it. When you decide to go into a particular field—any field—you can see the people in that field who have come before you and get a pretty good idea of what's in store for you if you walk the same road. It begs the question, "Well, what did you expect?"

JRM: Well, you're *not* going to make a living from it, that's for sure. How many really creative artists are able to make a living from playing creative music? I have a film of Tchaikovsky. The only reason this cat was able to do what he did was because some woman heard his playing and liked him. She had some money and she became his sponsor. Before he had that sponsor he was going through the same things as a jazz musician. If Bach, Beethoven and Mozart hadn't had the church to be their sponsor, they would've been out there by themselves.

Unfortunately, black music is oppressed the same way that the people are oppressed. I admire Archie Shepp very much. If you check out some of Archie's earlier Impulse recordings, he was always rebelling. But he also told me that when he was recording for Impulse, they only let him record one album a year. And he was on welfare at that time, making less than six thousand dollars a year.

Because some artists have X amount of recordings out, most people figure they're doing very well. They *ain't* doing that well, man! The records are out there and it *looks* good. I had a couple of artists tell me, "Man, if they'd give me the money for all these records, they could have them." It's nice to have a product out on the market if it's bringing you some income. But, if it's

not, how are you benefitting from it? You're not. The exposure is fine, but the club owner and the concert promoter don't see that kind of exposure. These cats say, "Well, where's your record? Send me a couple of tapes." They want half your life before they will give you a \$50-a-night gig. I've sent out a lot of material. When I went to my accountant about my income taxes, he said I'd spent more money than I made. SF: Can you tell me about the function of the drumset in what you call "creative music"?

JRM: Well, in creative music, one very rarely uses the bass drum. In a big band you have to because it helps push it. But the bass drum is actually only supposed to be used for accents. Other than that, in terms of keeping the time, the sock cymbal does it. It's either on "2" and "4," or "1" and "3."

SF: Unless you're playing like Elvin Jones.

JRM: Well, Elvin's thing is poly. And here again, Elvin's playing it, but I bet you if you notated it and said, "Elvin, this is what you just played," he wouldn't be able to play it. It's fine to analyze, but some artists will get into the analysis of it so much that they forget that one of the things the music has to do all the time is swing.

I was playing with Jaki Byard's big band, reading the charts right down. He told me, "Man, you're not *swinging*. You're reading the music but you're not pushing the band."

When I was up at the conservatory, I played in George Russell's ensemble. The music was real interesting and very challenging, but in all the time I played in it, the band never swung. It wasn't just me. The music was very creative and very rhythmic, but it never swung. It wasn't like you could really pop your fingers to it, or get up and dance. That wasn't going on. And it happens when musicians get so technical.

SF: What drummers had the most influence on you?

JRM: When I was coming up, the two major influences were Blakey and Max. They still are. Max is more of a technician and he's so unique in his playing, and Art's got that whole drive. It's just two different perspectives, but they're saying so much. Drummers who are coming up in music now and who weren't influenced in some way by one of these gentlemen are lacking something in their drumming. These guys are two of the strongest forces out there in the music business *now*. I'm only referring to creative music.

I think the best band Blakey had was the band with Lee Morgan in it. Lee must've been a hell of an influence on Art. I played with Lee at some sessions. Here again, with Lee Morgan and Spanky DeBrest, when they put you out there so fast when you're so young, man, so many things can happen that you're not able to adjust to. Dope messed Lee up and drinking messed Spanky up. Attitude is the whole thing,

man. It's like how you really carry yourself in whatever environment. If you're going to play at the White House, you know what you've got to do. If you're going to play up in Harlem at Small's, then you have to adjust to *that* environment. Artists have that little thing in them where if they don't like something, they're going to let people know about it through their attitude changes, instead of thinking, "Hey, this is where I'm at, so let me adjust to the environment that I'm in."

Jaki Byard hipped me to a lot. He's very flexible and he's got the personality, the attitude and the things that go along with it. So he can get along with anyone. Sometimes I used to think he was a little bit too open, because I felt that he wasn't laying down the law with musicians in the band. Sometimes you do have to do that because some people take kindness for weakness and they abuse it. When that happens, you can hear it in the music. It doesn't come across the way that it would if that respect was there.

I just did a thing at Lincoln Center, and a lot of musicians got on me because I didn't call them. I'm very selective in the different artists I use. I used certain musicians who were students at Amherst because they needed to come to New York. I used musicians from Philadelphia because they're excellent musicians, but they have to come out of Philadelphia every now and then. Regardless of whether people want to live in New York or not, New York is the mecca of export/import for the arts. You have to come here and spend a little time if you want to get over in the arts in some way, whether it be in music, painting, or whatever! It's the environment that you're in that really makes you become a stronger musician. New York is survival.

I know musicians now who just about make it from working a gig that might only be paying \$100, and they might not work for another week and a half or two weeks. But for some reason, man, they don't get out of the music. It's like it's a drug that keeps pulling them back into it. In New York, now, if you make \$50 or \$75, you're doing good. If you're playing five nights that's fine. But most clubs you're doing a Thursday, Friday and Saturday. At Sweet Basil's you do four nights. So you might come out of there with \$250 per man. They can't afford any more than that because of their overhead. But a lot of musicians will play these clubs because they still have the opportunity to play their music. They're jazz rooms.

SF: That goes back to what we were saying, that if someone wants to make it in this business, they'll pay the price.

JRM: You've got to put the effort into it for it to start rolling. A lot of kids want you to give them this stuff; they don't want to do the work, man. But then nothing will happen. That's what I found with some musicians. If you let them lay back and not really produce what they have to, then they

won't. They want you to do the work for them. Today, the opportunity is there to go to school. It's not forced, but if students want to get something out of school, then they will.

Today, it's very hard to get three or four musicians together to really function as a unit. But all of those musicians who came out of Kansas City during the Swing Period—we're talking about 20 or 25 musicians—all these cats functioned as one. That's why if one person did one thing, then everybody else knew exactly what that person was doing. It became a unit. Today, we have a lot of leaders, a lot of stars, and a lot of very good musicians, but we don't have any groups that play as a unit. Well, Buddy Rich's band is a unit.

SF: That's one of the reasons why so many jazz musicians aren't doing well economically.

JRM: That's it. That's one thing I learned about rock bands. Even though these cats aren't playing a lot of music, they'll play together for six months or whatever, and when they come back, their sound is together. I don't know what it is with jazz artists, but we have a hard time doing things collectively. Cats can't say that they don't have enough time, because they do. That's an excuse.

Today, the thing is money. We were speaking before about whether or not an artist should make the change over from creative music to commercial music. It's very hard not to.

SF: Well, why not? Let's use B.B. King as an example. All of a sudden he can make some money. But, he's been on the chitlin' circuit forever.

JRM: That's the whole thing, man. I don't knock him. I just don't know if I would be comfortable doing it all the time. But then

again, we don't know what George Benson or B.B. King are doing, or someone like Stanley Turrentine, who's doing a very commercial thing. But I know that Stanley goes up to the Bronx and Brooklyn, and plays sessions. There are times, I'm sure, when these artists who are doing the very commercial thing leave that, and go back and just do some playing. I think they have to have a release.

But, you have to realize that after an artist has put so much time into playing, if an opportunity comes along, I don't think you should shove it. Other musicians put down musicians who make that transition. I can't put them down because I can see how much you go through just to get to certain levels. To be honest, there's only enough room at the top for a certain amount of artists. Everyone isn't going to make it! Some cats have to realize that they're not going to make it all the way up to that top level. If you can accept it and digest it, then you know what you have to do to make it on the level that you're at.

SF: Everybody has different gifts. We have to realize our strengths.

JRM: And our weaknesses. You can overcome your weaknesses, but only to a certain degree, and you're still going to be at the level you're at regardless of what you do.

We often get sidetracked. And in the process of getting sidetracked, we lose respect for the musicians who have been out there a long time, like Max Roach, Jo Jones, Tony Williams and Jack DeJohnette. They've been out there for a long time. Some younger musicians think that there are some shortcuts. There aren't any shortcuts.

I told some of my students in Amherst that I used to practice single strokes nine hours a day sitting in the basement. I practiced them open and closed from 9:00 in the morning until noon. I'd stop for lunch, and then go back and practice from about 1:00 until 7:00. I was building some muscles that I ordinarily wouldn't use. Some of my students would say, "Man, you used to sit around for nine hours just practicing single strokes?" It'd be the same thing as somebody sitting down at the piano and practicing scales. And we hear *that* all the time! The point is that the pianists are doing it to get their fingers in shape. Drummers do it to get their fulcrum in shape. It's the same exercise. You're just doing it with

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a different instrument. Drummers today want to learn a couple of beats, and then they figure that's it.

Musicians are always learning. I try to get to a drum teacher every now and then—just to keep my eyes together and my mind together because the music is changing. Nothing changes that much rhythmically. It's usually going to be in 2/4, 4/4, 3/4 or 6/8. Rhythmically it falls into one of those categories. The thing is how to interpret the different notations that are used today.

SF: Drumset is probably the only instrument where there isn't, and has never been, one specific set of notations.

JRM: There isn't. That's why a drummer has to be a very good interpreter. Studio drummers have to adapt to whatever is written out for the drummer. A lot of times, different composers write different things for the drums but they mean the same thing. The drums have always been considered an instrument for sound effects. In New Orleans or early traditional jazz, the drums acted as a timekeeper for marches. Drums definitely weren't considered a creative instrument.

SF: Were you teaching drums on the college level?

JRM: Yeah. I don't teach drums that much now and I should. One thing that's good about teaching is, if you're getting students who are beginners, it always takes you back to the beginning. You can ask some drummers now to play a ratamacue and they will have forgotten it. They've forgotten what the 26 rudiments are. So teaching beginners refreshes your memory, which is good. But also, in teaching, one has to have a lot of patience, and a lot of musicians don't have patience. They have the energy, and the only way for them to release it is to play. By playing they're able to satisfy that need that's there. But the ability to be in front of a class and have the patience to teach is also an art.

I've had some musicians come up as guest lecturers at the University of Massachusetts and Northeastern. A lot of them are excellent musicians but very bad teachers. There are some exceptions, like Jaki Byard. This guy's a genius of a musician, and he's also a very superb teacher. He has the rapport with students that I haven't seen with other teachers.

Archie Shepp is a good teacher also, but he'll go way above his students' heads in what he's talking about. Archie's thing in college was journalism; he's heavily into literature.

So teaching is only for a few select jazz artists. One has to have a lot of time and patience in order to stand in front of college students who've reached the point of really making a decision in their lives in terms of what they want to do.

It still has to start at home with the parents. I used to go into the black communities in Roxbury and Bromley Heath. The



Photo by Charles Stewart



parents never hit the kids, even if they did something wrong. So to the kids, it was still alright because there wasn't any punishment. Some parents took it to the extreme, but the discipline wasn't there. By the time the kids got to elementary school, the discipline thing was gone. The teachers in elementary school were spending more time disciplining the kids than they were teaching. The other thing is that they don't read, and they don't *retain* what they do read. Who's going to be the next generation? How are they going to survive? And going back into the music, the more complex the music is, the less people really want to listen to it. If it's simple and it doesn't involve any thinking, the kids will go for it.

SF: Did you find any challenges in being a left-handed drummer?

JRM: Yeah. I really didn't want to play left-handed, because I was concerned about sitting in. I told my teacher, "I won't be able to go and play. I'll have to be changing people's drums around." He said, "Well, if you play well enough, you won't have to sit in with other people." It made a lot of sense.

My teacher told me that whatever hand you use the most should be the hand that you use on your ride cymbal. The muscles have been used more in that hand and it's stronger. I can play right-handed, but the feeling is so much different. I'm ambidextrous.

I found that most cats don't mind you changing the snare and the sock cymbal. If I was going to sit in and saw that a drummer had the drumset tied down, I wouldn't even ask to sit in. A lot of times I really don't want to sit in. I think there's a period of time in musicians' lives where they do a lot of sitting in. I've done that. Now, if I'm going to play, it's serious business. I don't have to play to let other musicians or the audience know that I'm a drummer. You're not proving anything to yourself

and you shouldn't have to prove it to the other musicians. I'm a good drummer, but I'm no Max Roach, Tony Williams, or Art Blakey. I have my own style, and one will always hear the *influence* of Max and Art in my playing. But it's not like I'm out there to outdo other drummers, because I don't think you really can. There's something unique about all the drummers. Roy Haynes doesn't get the exposure that he should, and he's such a versatile drummer. Anyone who can go from backing a vocalist like Sarah Vaughan to filling in for Elvin with John Coltrane has got to be very versatile. I haven't seen his kind of versatility in too many other drummers.

I don't really have that much association with rock. But, there's a lot I should know about the history of rock, not only as a teacher, but as a player. You're limited if you're not that well-rounded. If a person says, "I just play jazz," that's not very well-rounded. When someone asks me what I play, I say, "I play music."

I'm not heavily into reggae music, but it might be fun doing it, so I'll check it out. A cat in Boston wrote an article that said I was an avant-garde player. Now, when someone says you're an avant-garde player, that means you don't play nothing else. People will begin to label you. They have to have it in certain categories so that they know how to relate to it. Someone will say, "What kind of music do you play? Bebop? Mainstream? Third Stream? Avant-garde? Fusion?" They go through the whole cycle. The purpose of it is to categorize it so that the people within the industry will know what type of music it is. When someone asks me what type of music I play, I say, "Contemporary." That covers a broad spectrum. You can also be pigeonholed if you say you play black music. Well, that's fine, but that can be from Mississippi John Hurt, to John Coltrane, to Leontyne Price, to Stevie Wonder. That's broad! Which one of those areas are you

playing music in? But so often the title of the music is misleading to people. People say "jazz" or "rock." What is that? I have some idea of what it means, but it can be very misleading.

SF: You've performed with straight-ahead players, singers, and even progressive musicians. Could you explain your concept for drumming in these situations?

JRM: With the mainstream musicians, I begin to note their characteristics even before I play with them. One of the ways I do that is through listening to recordings. That way, you become familiar with the personality and attitude of the artists, so that when you get with them, you're pretty familiar with their background. Doing the straight-ahead things you become even more familiar with what you can do with avant-garde music. I don't put them apart, but there's definitely a difference. You have to be flexible enough today so that you're able to do both. I haven't gotten into it, but you should be able to play the rock, the R&B and the disco things. I've always played avant-garde music. I feel very comfortable playing it.

SF: Are drums in an avant-garde situation more of an equal voice than in other situations?

JRM: A lot more. You're not just a timekeeper. You're soloing along with the soloist. One of the things that I enjoy about the area of avant-garde music, or more contemporary music, is that you can explore a lot more, but the drummer has to be very conscious of what the other musicians are doing. You really have to listen. You have to be very conscious of dynamics and mood changes between two or three other instruments. You're able to solo, but your main function is as a supportive instrument. I relate that to traditional African music. Regardless of how much the drums might solo, they become the instrument that primarily keeps that rhythm and time going behind other drummers, dancers,

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and whatever other activities are going on.

A drummer has to be aware that time-keeping is one of his main functions, whether it be in mainstream, bebop, or avant-garde. Your function is to make sure that the time doesn't move around or go anywhere, so that the other artists won't be misplaced in what they're doing.

SF: Who do you feel are the trend setters in avant-garde drumming?

JRM: Someone who I think was, and still is, is Sunny Murray. Also Beaver Harris, and people like Milford Graves, Michael Carvin, Jerome Cooper and Steve McCall.

SF: I've heard many good things from Sunny Murray, but he's sometimes criticized for not being able to swing.

JRM: To be honest, I don't know if he knows how to. I've never heard him do that. But in terms of setting different moods and putting a lot of undercurrent underneath what the soloist is doing, he's very capable of doing that. But I've never heard him do any swinging, and I've done a few gigs with him in Philadelphia.

With someone like Philly Joe Jones, who's a straight-ahead drummer, you can hear some things where he's playing outside—not like Jerome Cooper, but it is that sense of being outside of the normal structure of what one would allow for the drummer to do.

Elvin Jones' things would be more avant-garde than straight-ahead, to me. He's a forerunner with that whole poly-

rhythm thing he uses to set that pace.

With drummers today who are playing in the avant-garde idiom, I don't see them as doing a lot of things, but I still feel that even if you're doing something in the avant-garde category, it should always swing, regardless of how many instruments you have there and how much you're doing. The music should always be swinging. I think Jaki Byard made me very aware of that.

SF: If your students wanted to study the lineage of drum pioneers in avant-garde after Elvin, who do you suggest they listen to?

JRM: I think someone like Jack DeJohnette would be a good example. I'd suggest that the student get out and hear some drummers play live. That gives you a much better sense of what the drummers are really doing. One can listen to some early Ronald Shannon Jackson. I'm not talking about what he's doing today—I'm not that familiar with what he's doing musically—but he was doing some very creative things around the time he was with Ornette Coleman.

There are some Music Minus One records where they have the chart already written out, but the drum part isn't there. You can put in your own drum part. Then they have another section where what you should play is written out. Something like this would give a drummer a variety of ideas to use. That's vitally important in

terms of what's going on in music today.

SF: What does your drumset consist of?

JRM: I've never changed my drumset. I've always used Gretsch drums, and I've been playing for close to 20 years. I've got Gretsch sets in New York, Philadelphia and Amherst. The dimensions of my drums vary, but in all instances wood drums are the best because you get more of a natural sound. I'm primarily using calf heads on my snare drum. When I was in California I got a whole new order of Paiste cymbals. Steve McCall turned me on to Paiste. The sound of the Paiste cymbals is so much different than the Zildjians. It's a matter of taste. I picked up two 505 cymbals in California. It's a heavy, beautiful sounding cymbal.

SF: Can you offer any tuning suggestions?

JRM: I tune my drums in fifths. I got that from listening to Max Roach a lot. His drums were tuned in fifths a lot. I also developed that idea from playing timpani in undergraduate school. You can really hear the difference in sound. There's nothing worse than having the bass drum, side tom-tom and mounted tom-tom really tuned, and having your snare drum tuned horribly. The snare is the major drum! Max and Blakey have their drums tuned very well. I also like the way Tony Williams tunes his drums.

SF: What does the future hold for J.R. Mitchell?

JRM: It looks good. I got a lot of good response from people for the artist-in-residence that I recently did at the University of New Mexico. I have really been concentrating a little bit more on writing. That's something I majored in at graduate school, but I haven't really done a whole lot of it. I'm revising music that I've written before, and getting a chance to hear it played. I'd like to get a sextet together. I'd use Byard Lancaster as the sax player, and Calvin Hill is the bass player I'd choose.

I just finished doing a thing at the University of Massachusetts with Walter Davis, Jr. I like him as a pianist. Sonelius Smith is a pianist I've gotten adjusted to; he's very versatile. I've been doing some work with Archie Shepp off and on.

I have a record coming out called *Moving*, with Byard Lancaster on alto and flute, Calvin Hill on bass, and Bob Nelom is on piano on one side. On the other side, Jerome Hunter replaces Calvin, and Justo Amerio is on flute and tenor sax. That's going to be released on Doria Records, my own label. I have another release on Rah Records with a saxophonist named Shamik Farah that has one of my compositions on it. Sonelius Smith is on piano, John Stubblefield on sax, Charles Davis on trombone, and Kyoto Fujiawa is the bassist.

Things are looking a little better, but I guess we always look for it to be a little broader than it is. Jazz should be played in

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universities and colleges so you can get to the students who are actually going to be the people who will be the liaison for the music in the future. We should get jazz into the high schools, junior high schools, and even down to the pre-school level. That way, we're educating the kids as they grow up.

The writers of the music that we are representing have to be people who have spent some time with the artists. We have to be able to write about the music so we can get the layman to understand what we're saying.

SF: Again, in *As Serious As Your Life*, Sirone, a bassist is quoted as saying, "We're losing all our front-line players. I'm afraid that in five years' time we won't have any leaders left." The author, Valerie Wilmer, goes on to explain that "Sirone was bewailing the gap left in the musicians' street community by the men who have found sanctuary in the university. Since the introduction of black studies, the American colleges have claimed a number of musicians as lecturers. Guaranteed income and the peaceful environment were very attractive to artists frustrated by the constant rejection of their wares, regardless of whether the academic life had been a part of their original plan." How do you feel about these sentiments?

JRM: She's saying that the musicians are becoming a part of the institution, maybe not even wanting to, but as a means of survival of the system or society. And because of that they maintain that position in the universities rather than lingering in the clubs as they'd done in the past. My decision to go into the university was based in part on the fact that I was doing some playing and making some funds, but I wasn't playing the stuff that I wanted to play. A part-time opportunity came for very little money—an academic opening to teach a jazz course at Northeastern—and so I tried it. Once I became attracted to it—and I was able to pretty much do what I wanted to do in teaching—it seemed like a haven for me to be able to continue to at least function in the musical circle that I wanted to, and still be able to teach and play at the same time. You *do* get drawn into the institution. I know some people who are so into it that it would be very difficult for them to give it up and go back onto the streets. Musicians I know of who are able to do this are Archie Shepp and Max Roach. Jackie McLean has the same sort of arrangement at the University of Hartford. Jaki Byard was able to do it at the New England Conservatory. In response to that portion of Valerie's book, yes, a lot of musicians have taken refuge in the universities, because it's a steady, consistent income and you know from week to week that you have X amount of salary coming in, other than relying solely and totally on performing. There's an advantage to that because when

people know that you're just relying on performing, they often take advantage of you. Jackie McLean told me that now he can be very selective in what and where he wants to perform. That's fine. That's the way it should be. Donald Byrd isn't doing a lot of performing now but he was telling me the same thing.

I've played the kind of music Sirone's talking about in lofts and wherever, and it sure sounds good. But you're only playing to two or three people. You survive through just about any means possible. The way it's been in the arts for the last six or seven years, I know musicians who are playing out on the street, which I would never do because of principle. But they're not looking at principle. They're thinking, "Hey, it's money and I don't have any." I don't totally put them down for it. I just have other sources of income that I can go to.

My main thrust and direction right now is that I'm really getting interested in electronic music. Not that the music will be *totally* electronic, but that there will be electronic music in an area where the music will always be able to swing.

Regardless of what type of music we as jazz artists are playing, whether it be classical, folk, rock, R&B or whatever, it should always have the feeling of swinging so that people can tap their feet.

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