JOHN ABBOTT

AKUA DIXON

A CLASSICAL CELLIST'S BIG JAZZ FOOTPRINT

BY JASON GROSS

For over a half century, cellist Akua Dixon has helped to extend the musical vocabulary of an instrument most associated with the classical world. She began studies at a young age and then in the late '60s found herself in demand, spending the next decade recording with the likes of Archie Shepp, Don Cherry and Carmen McRae and later with Henry Threadgill, Abbey Lincoln, David Byrne, Aretha Franklin and Lauryn Hill. Never turning her back on her classical roots, she has written compositions for string quartet, orchestra and cello, big band and opera. Dixon has also created musical curriculums, led her Quartette Indigo ensemble and has worked with noted family members including violinist Gayle Dixon (her late sister), singer Andromeda Turre (her daughter), drummer Orion Turre (her son) and trombonist Steve Turre (her former husband).

THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD: Do you recall how you got started on cello?

AKUA DIXON: My elementary school had a lovely orchestra and music program. I started cello in the fourth grade. I had an older sister (Gayle Dixon) who played violin. So that was really my major activity. After school, we would always play music. When I got to junior high school, we started gigging, as well as doing orchestras. New York was really very different with the public school system. And there were borough-wide orchestras, citywide orchestras, citywide string orchestras.

TNYCJR: And what musicians inspired you when you were young?

DIXON: I grew up in a household that listened to a lot of African American music: blues, jazz, gospel, hymns, spirituals. And I went to different Black churches where I was exposed to the legacy of that music.

TNYCJR: Of your many professional collaborations, what have been some of the most memorable of the early freelance work you've done?

DIXON: Oh, there's quite a few. You have to realize that when I started freelancing, there were no women working in that arena. Even in Broadway, in the places where I opened doors, my sister and I, we were some of the first ones that ever worked there. With the New York Philharmonic and orchestras, even as late as 1977, it was all white male. So that was the whole journey through the Civil Rights Movement that I also had to deal with to get to do some of this work that we're talking about. Some of the most memorable ones were people like Woody Shaw, James Carter, Max Roach, Rahsaan Roland Kirk and Duke Ellington.

Working with Max made a long-lasting impression and it was a wonderful opportunity to get to work with him for the few years that I did. The problem with trying to get strings to swing and playing jazz is that they haven't developed the articulation in the bow and the phrasing to be able to play. To learn how to swing and play jazz, you have to study different ways of playing to be able to communicate in a way that swings.

When I first started work, one of the first jobs I got was with James Brown at the Apollo, around 1970. He wanted an all-girl quartet, and my sister and I were so excited to play with him. But you had to learn a certain phrasing and a rhythmic style, which we had heard because growing up in a Black community, we'd go to parties where his music was played. So, it was a matter of figuring out how to play that stylistically and to be in the pocket, with the drums and with the rhythm section. And know when he goes to the bridge, that was the groundwork of developing that style of playing.

TNYCJR: Could you talk about the early string quartet you formed?

DIXON: I started my string quartet writing in the early '70s with my sister, violist John Blake Jr. and Maxine Roach. We were all freelancing in New York and did a lot of recordings and constantly played together, five or six days a week. We also got together and did my music, and it was a joy to get to play with them. That was the foundation of my starting to write in a more jazzy vein. When I started working, I was getting jobs where we were playing classical string quartets. I started writing and throwing in a piece of mine during programs that we did in Black neighborhoods and libraries. And there would be spirituals that I would arrange for the string quartet to play, more rhythmic pieces that the people would recognize and enjoy, part of their cultural heritage. So, I developed that style of writing for a string quartet, one that I could have swing without a drummer.

TNYCJR: The grant that you received from the National Endowment of the Arts must have been a nice boost to your work.

DIXON: It was at that point in the late '70s, early '80s, where it was wonderful to be able to submit some music that was respected enough to win a grant that I could continue my craft. I grew up in a lower income family, and have worked all my life, so being able to sit home and write a piece of music of that magnitude, you just didn't have that. I was always out working. By the time I was out of high school, I was in the Broadway pits, the Apollo, Brooklyn Philharmonic, Alvin Ailey Dance Theater—constantly working to earn money so I could survive. For those jobs, you work a few weeks, a year or a couple of months. So, over the years, it adds up, but it wasn't a situation where I could find time to write a large-scale piece. It takes a lot of time to compose, so I needed a sense of solitude. To win a grant meant that I could compose the piece "Afrika! Afrika!". I won the grant in 1981, then I had access to a string ensemble because I was working with the String Reunion orchestra that violinist Noel Pointer founded and where I was the director of New Music. There were a lot of African American string players in New York and we got together and formed a string orchestra that did concerts in the communities. "Afrika! Afrika!" was a new chance for me after going to conservatories and writing things that were more sonata allegro style. It was so good to write something that was a concert

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 26)

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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

piece which a professional level cellist would enjoy playing, but also had room for improvisation.

TNYCJR: How did you come up with the idea to form Quartette Indigo?

DIXON: What I wanted were players who really played the instrument, from a classical standpoint, but also who understood the phrasing of African American music and could improvise. When I started back in the '70s, there were not players like that around, including myself. We had to learn how to do that together. So, I was developing that kind of sound. Quartette Indigo played original compositions of composers like Jimmy Heath. We recorded a piece of his, an arrangement of his transcription to John Coltrane's "Naima" on *Quartette Indigo* (Landmark, 1994). That was really amazing to work with him on that particular piece. But it's an improvising quartet. To be able to also improvise is truly wonderful.

TNYCJR: On your own solo albums, you used a rhythm section or sometimes stayed with a string section. How do you make those decisions?

DIXON: The times when I had a string quartet, I didn't have a rhythm section. It's difficult to find a dynamic balance between a string quartet and jazz instruments. Violin or cello just is not as loud in any way so you can't compete on that level. I always just enjoy playing in the string quartet because that's what I grew up doing. And there's a lovely sound quality of playing in a live string quartet with no amplification. It just brings you such joy, the sound of it. When I work with a rhythm section, I'm usually amplified, and I'm playing in a stronger and a different way, and I'm playing out front. I'm not just playing as the cellist in the string quartet: I'm playing the melody, I'm playing the solos and leading the band.

TNYCJR: You've worked with your children on music projects. How has that been?

DIXON: I was not touring, and was raising my kids, freelancing in New York. They got to go to things, from ballet rehearsals to orchestra rehearsals to show music, to jazz and were exposed to it when I did educational programs. I didn't leave them at home. I took them with me. They read music and write on a very high level. Andromeda (Turre) is really focused. And both kids have a different writing style. It's really interesting to hear what she's doing. She has a new album out called *From the Earth*. The project is just outstanding—the journey through climate change and she talks to people. And the music is just vibrant and it tells a wonderful story. My son (Orion Turre) also composes and works with me a lot of times. I like to use his trio when I need a rhythm section in my ensemble. After the violist Melvyn Roundtree and violinist John (Blake Jr.) passed, I decided that I was going to put the cello out front in a quartet, with piano or guitar, bass and drums.

TNYCJR: For your educational programs, other than technique, what do you try to impart to students?

DIXON: Be open-minded and listen and appreciate all the world's music. We should learn good technique and sound. Don't disregard the music of your own culture.

TNYCJR: The Harlem Chamber Players concert that you're doing this month at Schomburg Center looks exciting. Can you fill us in on what to expect?

DIXON: I'm really excited about this one because I really haven't had an opportunity to use all of the skills that I learned in the conservatory as far as writing. I did a commission a few years ago to write a 15-minute piece, "We The People", for a classical quartet, based on some of the tenets of justice, equality, democracy. It was a challenging opportunity. The piece is written in the whole tone scale. It's very abstract: it's really a dialog, moreso than in the style of a typical string quartet, even though it's written for that instrumentation. I worked it out so that it's a conversation that flows melody between all four instruments, speaking at different times and sometimes together.

For more info visit akuadixon.com. Dixon is at Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Feb. 13 (part of The Harlem Chamber Players' 17th Annual Black History Month Celebration). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Steve Turre—*Fire And Ice* (Stash, 1988)
- James Blood Ulmer—*Harmolodic Guitar With Strings* (Koch/DIW, 1993)
- Quartette Indigo—*Afrika! Afrika!* (Savant, 1997)
- Akua Dixon—*Moving On* (Akua's Music, 2011)
- Akua Dixon—*Akua Dixon* (Akua's Music, 2014)
- Akua Dixon—*Akua's Dance* (Akua's Music, 2017)

(SPECIAL FEATURE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13)

On the cultural side of the issue, there are two broad concerns: Americans in general, including African Americans, are shockingly ignorant of their history. And jazz is simply not the music that most young Black students listen to. These issues intersected in 1970s New York, when its budget crisis led to draconian cuts in arts education in the city, removing music education from the public schools. Young Black and brown New Yorkers subsequently created an art to express themselves without live music: hip-hop. Robert Trowers, 68, was already a music student at CCNY during this time, when that school's demographics "made it practically an HBCU," he recalls, laughing. Now the head of instrumental jazz at North Carolina Central University (an HBCU in Durham, NC), Trowers understood then what had happened. "Creative people are going to find a way," he says. "That is especially true of creative poor people. Now, jazz is simply not the music that Black people listen to."

Anastacia Jones, 16—a student at both Newark Arts High School and the community program, Newark School of the Arts—is blunt in her assessment of her fellow Black students' knowledge of their cultural history: "This generation, we don't know a lot about jazz. Jazz is deeply rooted in African American culture. It sucks to say it, but we don't know about our own history. It's the truth." But the more sanguine of those surveyed point to reasons for hope: the continuing vitality of HBCUs, the success of urban public arts magnet high schools, the Black church, vital community-based programs, the continuing involvement of Black musical families, and a related concept, the 400 years of shared history that compels Black Americans to help each other. The broadest-minded humanists also noted that all humanity is descended from Africa, a history Ellington embodied in his concept album, *A Drum Is a Woman* (Columbia, 1956). So anyone who is drawn to the call of the drum, and brings humility, respect and curiosity, is welcome.

Trowers agrees that years of budget cuts have significantly narrowed the feeder programs in majority Black schools. But his HBCU program remains strong, due partly to the continuing importance of music in the Black church. "They might need some work on technique, but they've got the feel," he says, speaking of his students who were brought up singing and playing in the church. Houston's High School for the Performing and Visual Arts (HSPVA) is arguably the crown jewel of the nation's public arts magnet schools. The school's representation of top players of all ethnicities is beyond significant: Chris Dave, James Francies, Robert Glasper, Eric Harland, Jason Moran, Mike Moreno, Kendrick Scott, Walter Smith III, Helen Sung—oh, and Beyoncé and Solange Knowles. Such schools put no pay wall on Black culture and continue to produce extraordinary musicians.

Dr. Billy Taylor was a visionary who knew in the early '60s that urban children were no longer drawn to jazz, so he designed Jazzmobile to take the culture to the kids. Jazzmobile's free family concerts, festivals and special events in New York have continued since 1964. The importance of longtime community-based programs today also includes Philadelphia's Settlement Music School and Clef Club, which have provided virtually free jazz education for more than 50 years. Lovett Hines, Jr., 81, built the education arm of the Clef Club. Unconcerned by ethnicity, Hines has taught and inspired some of the finest musicians: Johnathan Blake, Joe Block, Joey DeFrancesco, Orrin Evans, Justin Faulkner, Christian McBride, Bilal (Oliver), Jaleel Shaw, Ahmir K. Thompson (aka Questlove) and Immanuel Wilkins, among hundreds of others. "The Black element is always going to be there," Hines states. "All the kids who really play, whatever they look like, they know where this music comes from. That's what's going to save our music."

McBride, 52, and his wife Melissa Walker, 47, have modeled their Montclair-based program, Jazz House Kids (JHK), after that of "Uncle 'Love'." Explains Walker, "This isn't just about music. We want to affect society." Between her leadership and McBride's iconic status at the center of the jazz world, JHK is a powerhouse, using its reach to re-introduce instruments and music education into Newark, Jersey City, Elizabeth and soon Irvington, NJ. Combined with their New York partnership with Trinity Church, JHK is now able to reach more than a thousand kids annually who would otherwise have no instruments or exposure to jazz.

Many young Black musicians will continue to come from families who are themselves deeply involved in the music. Koleby Royston, 21, is a phenomenal young drummer. His parents are pianist Shamie and drummer Rudy Royston. His aunt is his mother's younger sister, saxophonist Tia Fuller. Bassist Rashaan Carter, 38, also comes from a deeply musical family, and his story illustrates how Black working musicians and families help each other. "I call it the 'mutual aid society'," Carter says. With a wealth of Washington, D.C., bandstand experience, Carter came to New York in 2004 at 18 to attend The New School. He found the approach there stifling, though. After saxophonist Antoine Roney, a family friend, got him an apartment in his building, soon Carter began playing with Antoine's brother, trumpeter Wallace Roney, Sr. and his then-wife, pianist and composer Geri Allen. By age 21, Carter had been mentored by Buster Williams and played with the Roney brothers, Geri Allen, Benny Golson, Carl Allen and Joe Chambers. He had no further need for academia and has worked ever since. Carter takes a nuanced view about the future of Black kids playing jazz. "It certainly matters that Black culture is carried forward," he notes. "But it's not about race reductionism. It's about a connection to the values of the culture. In the larger humanist view, people who carry a sense of humility, a sense of integrity, the elders will invite them in as someone who is worthy of being cared for without regard to race."

Pianist, composer, bandleader and teacher Orrin Evans, 49, reports that 90% of the students he teaches in college are "non-Black kids." He says, "When I teach, *I* bring the diversity." But he also believes it is essential that Black kids themselves take part in carrying the culture forward. "People like me will always find a way" to help young Black musicians, Evans vowed. "It will be there for them. It's theirs: it's their legacy, it's their history."