

**FOUR MONTHS WITH ORNETTE**  
**John Litweiler interviews Kunle Mwanga**  
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- L** When did you move to New York?
- M** I moved from Chicago to New York in March of 1968.
- L** It was the year before so many musicians left Chicago.
- M** Right. The Art Ensemble of Chicago, (Lester Bowie, Malachi Favors, Joseph Jarman, Roscoe Mitchell and Don Moye), had already moved to Paris and I moved to New York City where I produced the first AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) concert.
- L** I'm thinking of the Creative Construction Company. Anthony Braxton, Leo Smith, Leroy Jenkins and Steve McCall.
- M** Yes. With Guests Muhal Richard Abrams and Richard Davis. I produced the concert at the Washington Square Methodist Church (Peace Church) in May of 1970.
- L** That had to be when Anthony Braxton and Leroy Jenkins had just returned from Europe. Am I remembering right?
- M** Exactly. Leroy and Anthony lived for a while with Ornette. Afterwards, Leroy moved into an apartment above my store, Liberty House. I rented the entire building consisting of two storefronts and four apartments. Leroy and I had met in Chicago where we are both from. We began working together in New York. In Chicago I worked with Bob Koester and Chuck Nessa at the Jazz Record Mart which was also the home of Delmark Records. It was to be my introduction to the record business.
- L** Yes. I remember that.
- M** It was also the period, in 1966, I frequented quite regularly on Friday evenings, the Reynolds Club student lounge and the Mandel Hall concerts at the University of Chicago. It was where I got in tune with the roots of the AACM. After I moved to New York and became proprietor of Liberty House, I realized I could do something for this music I liked so much. I produced a concert series with mostly AACM musicians. The Creative Construction Company concert was the first in that series. The non-AACM musicians that participated in the series were Dewey Redman, Eddie Moore, Bob Cunningham and Richard Davis.

- L Was the Creative Construction Company concert at a time when Braxton and Jenkins were living with you or Ornette?
- M Leroy was living in an apartment above Liberty House and Braxton was living in different places spending a lot of time in Washington Square Park playing chess. He wasn't playing much music at the time. He didn't want to play in the Peace Church concert.
- L No Kidding?
- M In fact, with the help of Richard Davis, we were able to take the Creative Construction Company to Boston where they performed at the New England Conservatory of Music. Braxton didn't want to go so we took Henry Threadgill in his place.
- L What kind of store was it that you had?
- M It was called Liberty House. It was the only place in New York where you could find recordings by AACM musicians. I was also selling African art, Indian and Peruvian crafts as well as works of art from other parts of the world. It all came together at Liberty House.
- L Very interesting! When you talk about selling African art, did you have someone go to Africa to buy for you?
- M No. There were individuals who understood what we were doing. They would go on trips and bring back materials that we would then buy and sale at very reasonable prices. For instance, there was a man who had returned from East Africa. He brought back an entire loft full of Makonde ebony-wood sculpture from Tanzania. I bought it all and sold it mostly to musicians and our community clientele who supported us. A lot of our goods also came from local artisans and importers. We were on the verge of developing a strategy for importing goods ourselves.
- L Do you recall some of the musicians who came by Liberty House?
- M Cecil Taylor, Frank Lowe, Hannibal Marvin Peterson, Albert Ayler, Ornette, Jackie Mclean. Jackie was teaching music at a drug rehabilitation center around the corner from the store. We helped him get a few musical instruments for his classes there. His daughter, Melonie, worked part time at Liberty House. Ray Nance used to come by. A lot of musicians and friends. Kareem Abdul Jabar. Bettye Davis used to come by and promised to bring Miles. When she did, we had the Eric Dolphy exhibit in the front window. He

stood there for a long time looking at it. Richard Davis use to come by. Jean Phillips. All the AACM musicians who came from Chicago to perform in the series came through. Dancers. John Parks, Michele Murray, Sandra McPherson. It was a very wholesome artistic atmosphere. We had lots of friends.

**L** How long did you have the store?

**M** From 1968 to 71. The staff consisted of Lauren Johnson Jess Simmons, Vernon McDonald and my brother Nantambu Mwanga.

**L** On the back of the Creative Construction Company album there is a credit to Ornette Coleman. I heard that he financed the concerts.

**M** Let me tell you how Ornette's name got there. First off, the concerts were financed by Liberty House. I paid the musicians, paid for the use of the church etc. Leroy Jenkins and I did most of the work for the concert. He was the musical director and conducted rehearsals in Ornette's storefront on Prince street. Ornette must have expressed a desire to record the concert and Leroy said OK. I didn't know about it until the engineer, Orville O'Brian, showed up with his equipment on the evening of the performance. About a year or so later, I received a call from Orville asking when he could expect to receive payment from Ornette for recording the concert. I told him he would have to speak with Ornette. After some time, I received a call from Ornette asking if I could pay Orville for the tapes and keep the tapes myself. I paid Orville and received the tapes from him. In my travels, I took the tapes with me to Europe and Japan searching for a company to buy them. Finally, I found Muse Records and related to Joe Fields that Ornette was responsible for having the concert recorded. Joe took that opportunity to put Ornettes name prominently on the recording. That's how Ornette's name came to be there. He didn't finance the concert. The artwork on the covers of the two releases, volumes 1 and 2 are horrible and are probably one of the reasons why the records did not sell as well as they should have.

**L** Two things interest me here. One is that you said that Ornette asked you to pay the engineer. That surprises me.

**M** Well, Ornette has gone through many changes. Now, in 1992, I understand much more than I did at that time in 1970. That was over twenty years ago. After having produced concerts and recordings and having managed musicians and organized all of those tours and understanding this business, I now see what position Ornette could have been in.

- L The other thing is that I got the impression that Leroy Jenkins was the real leader of that group.
- M Well, he was the leader only in the sense that he took responsibility for the music.
- L Someone had to organize it.
- M Yes. And see, because Braxton wasn't as interested in doing the concert, he didn't take any kind of active role its organization. Leroy was living upstairs over Liberty House and was very active in the organization and planning of the concert. There was a problem with Leroy assuming the musical directorship. It didn't come across too well with Leo Smith and Steve McCall. But it all worked out. Richard Davis was there at our invitation and Muhal was on the east cost and happened to be in town.
- L It was good fortune.
- M Yes it was.
- L What did you do after you sold the store?
- M Before I sold the store, I moved it to Lenox, Massachusetts on the grounds of what use to be Music Inn where Ornette and Don Cherry had come to study some ten years previous. I moved the store there at the invitation of the organizers of the Lenox Arts Center where they also invited me to produce two concerts within the structure of a summer music festival they were organizing. The landlord in New York would not give me a ten year renewal on my lease so we moved the store to Lenox [and] renamed it Thembi Crafts Center, where my brother Nantambu and I ran the store and produced three concerts. We presented the Art Ensemble of Chicago and the New York Bass Choir, with Bill Lee, Lisle Atkinson, Richard Davis, Ron Carter, Milt Hinton, Michael Fleming and Sam Jones, with guests Harold Mabern, George Coleman and Sonny Brown. The Art Ensemble performed two concerts, one on a Saturday and the other on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. The New York Bass Choir did one performance. When that series ended we sold the store to Vernon McDonald. He opened a shop in midtown, called Vernon Plus. I moved to Paris in September of 71 and hooked up with Anthony Braxton and became his manager. When we broke up in February of 74, the Art Ensemble was in Paris for a concert. Roscoe Mitchell called and asked to meet with me. He said the Art Ensemble wanted me to work with them. We all knew each other. In fact, when the Art Ensemble returned from Europe in 71, I was there, at the pier in New York to greet them. I wanted to produce a concert with them before they moved on to Chicago. They were so

intent on getting home, they packed their goods into two French Ford vans and took off. The opportunity to present the Art Ensemble in concert happened when we moved to Lenox. It was a great experience. The performances took place in August of 71. The following month I moved to Paris and Nantambu moved to Oakland, California. When Roscoe asked me to work with the Art Ensemble, I told him that after having worked so hard with Braxton, I needed a break. I moved to Oakland to see what was happening with my brother and the bay area. To go from working with Braxton directly to working with the Art Ensemble without a break would have been too much for me.

L If you had to manage them both?

M No. Not both. I'm saying that because I had broken with Anthony already, I just couldn't walk from Anthony to the Art Ensemble. It was heavy working with Anthony in Paris. That will be a very interesting chapter in my book, those experiences in Paris. Braxton, wanting compositions performed and the powers that be blocking him at every turn, wanting him to just play the saxophone. We went through so many changes in Paris. I had to have a break. I moved to the Bay area and produced a concert series with my production company, Earth Art Productions, in association with the Associated Students of the University of California at Berkeley. The first concert, in January 1975, was with the Art Ensemble of Chicago. In February, I brought Novella Nelson with Richard Davis, Linda Twine and Leopoldo Fleming. And in March, I brought Anthony Braxton with Roscoe, Leo Smith, Richard Tietelbaum and Kenny Wheeler. I commissioned Anthony to write a piece for ten-instruments. After the Art Ensemble's performance I told them I was available to meet with them. After the series, in April of 75, I flew to Chicago for a meeting and subsequently became their managing-agent. In ~~October~~<sup>3 FEB</sup> 75, I booked the Art Ensemble into the Five Spot in New York for a two week engagement. We also did two evenings at Jitu Weusi's club, The East, in Brooklyn.

L The Five Spot was still going?

M They re-opened.

L OK. That's what it was.

- M Yes. Joe and Iggy Termini, the owners, re-opened the club. We were there for two-weeks. The Art Ensemble had their first opportunity to have a residency in New York and the New York audience had their first opportunity to hear and digest this great band.
- L Did you become Ornette's manager in the late seventies?
- M I became Ornette's manager in 1979. He called in March.
- L He called you?
- M Yes. He called to ask me to help him put together a record company.
- L I'm thinking there was a recording, 'Of Human feelings'.
- M Yes. I co-produced that recording with Ornette. Did you see us on the cover of Billboard Magazine?
- L No.
- M In June 79 Ornette and I were on the cover of Billboard for the 'Of Human Feelings' session we did at CBS Studios. The copy under the photo refers to a cassette held in the photo by Cal Roberts, CBS senior vice president for operations marketing, as, "used by the label (CBS) to record its first digital jazz LP". In fact, Phrase text Recording Company had rented the studio and the Sony PCM Digital 140 Recorder, which had not been used by CBS in the US, to record 'Of Human Feelings'. It was not a CBS Record session. It was Ornette's session for his own company. Ornette was using their equipment. It states in that same copy that I am the associate producer but you don't see my name anywhere on the record jacket or CD.
- L I believe it says produced by Ornette Coleman.
- M Yes. Ornette produced it but not without a lot of help from his co-producer.
- L Was that Ornette or the record company that did that?
- M Well, Ornette says it was the record company. I wrote to the company, Antilles, and expressed the fact that my credit was deleted. I'm on the cover of Billboard and in the New York Times as co-producer. It was one of the most publicized recording sessions I had ever seen. Not the record. I'm talking about the session. We were in Billboard, Record

World, a half page article in the Amsterdam News all about being in the studio recording that record. I had sent press releases to all the media. It was part of a nationwide publicity scheme I had put together for Ornette. You see, 'Of Human Feelings' was Ornettes first recording on his own label. There is a book out written by an British fellow with a chapter titled 'Of Human Feelings'.

L A little thin book.

M Well, he starts the chapter by saying Ornette produced that recording for Antilles. But see, Ornette and I produced that recording for Phrase Text Recording Company which was Ornette's company.

L I'm just trying to remember if he called his publishing company Phrase Text before that.

M His publishing company is also called Phrase Text. I took the masters to Japan and did a licensing agreement with Trio Records.

L Who sold it to Antilles? You or him?

M Ornette or his representatives, who at the time was Stan and/or Sid Bernstein. I had closed the deal and had a signed licensing agreement with Trio Records to distribute that recording, in Japan only, under the Phrase Text Label. Ornette canceled the deal without meeting with me or reading the agreement he authorized me to go to Japan to make on behalf of Phrase Text Recording Company.

L Was Ornette playing much in public when you were managing him?

M No. He had not performed in public for the previous 5 years. His only public appearance during the period I worked with him was with Prime Time on Saturday Nite Live in April of 79 with Milton Berle as host.

L Milton Berle?

M Yes.

L Was it Ornette's choice not to play in public during that time?

M Yes it was his choice. My work with Ornette had to do with two recording sessions. One at RCA Studios and the other at Columbia Studios. The RCA session was a direct-to-disc session that didn't work out.

- L Was it a mechanical problem?
- M Yes. You had to record within a strict time frame. It never worked. Both those sessions were with Prime Time.
- L Was part of the problem finding places for Ornette to perform? Was part of the problem his price tag?
- M Yes.
- L You recall what he was asking?
- M To say it was his price tag, I would say he was certainly justified in what he was asking for. I agreed with him. I was also glad there was other work other than just trying to book him.
- L What other work were you doing?
- M Well, as I said, there were the two record sessions, Saturday Nite Live and the trip to Japan. While in Japan, I was able to preliminarily arrange a performance of Ornette's 'Skies of America' with the NHK Symphony Orchestra, one of, if not the best, symphony orchestras, in Japan. It was a very successful business trip. When I returned from Japan in mid-June 79, we were on the June 9th cover of Billboard. It seemed like things were happening. I had convinced John Snyder to place a full page ad in Billboard for Ornettes recording 'Body Meta'. Did you see that ad in the April 79 issue?
- L No.
- M It was probably the first and only time someone like Ornette had a full page color ad in Billboard. It simply read ORNETTE. at the top and BODY META at the bottom and in the middle of the page, a color print of a batik by Chief Z K Oloruntoba from Nigeria. That was the first procedure I did with Artist House Records on behalf of Ornette. I continued to project Ornette nationally.
- L National news.
- M Yes.
- L I was asking you about 1979 and 1980. I had the impression that the personnel of Prime Time changed. That is, that some musicians were leaving the band and others were joining. Is that true?

- M At the time I started working with Ornette the only person who left the band was Shannon Jackson.
- L Were they living with Ornette at that time?
- M No.
- L I had the impression they were. Did he still have his loft?
- M At that time, Ornette was living in a room in the loft where John Snyder had the offices of Artist House Records. Ornette was in the process of making a move and was staying there in the interim until he got to his next step.
- L How long was it exactly that you worked with Ornette?
- M It was short. We started in March of 79 and our relationship ended in June of 79. We accomplished a lot in that short period.
- L I had the idea that it lasted into 1980? Maybe I had never heard of Sid Berstein before then.
- M After we split, Ornette's next public performance was at the Public Theater with the singer Roberta Baum and Prime Time. After that, the next thing I heard was that he had hooked up with the Bernsteins. Do you know when he got together with the Bernsteins?
- L It had to be 80 or 81.
- M Yes in 80. Did you see Ornette when he came to the University of Illinois with Prime Time?
- L Yes
- M I was at that concert.
- L Were you working with Ornette again?
- M No. I was trying to get paid. I happened to be in Chicago at the time. I went to the concert to speak with him. We got along but I didn't get paid.
- L What had you gone on to do after that?
- M After I left Ornette I resumed working with David Murray. David and I started working together in 1977. I took a break during the time I was working with Ornette. I worked with David until August of 1990. From 1977 to 1990 with a break in 79 and in 80/81 when my mother was ill.

- L Does he ever get the Octet together?
- M You mean do they ever perform together?
- L Yes. After those records in the early 80's.
- M Yes. Not as much as they use to when David had consistent work at Sweet Basil's.
- L That was my favorite David Murray Band.
- M Did you catch us when we came to Chicago and played at...
- L The Jazz Festival?
- M No. We performed opposite Wynton at Ravinia.
- L No. I missed that. So you have been managing David Murray and...
- M Geri Allen, Ralph Peterson and now I'm managing Ed Blackwell. Let me say that you can imagine having worked with the Art Ensemble, Braxton and David Murray, then Ornette calls and asks me to work with him. I considered that to be an honor.
- L Sure. A great honor.
- M Yes. I had known Ornette, as a friend, every since I had my shop. He used to come in quite often and I use to go to his loft and shoot pool with him. I never really go after people and ask to manage them. Things can happen. You let some things happen. At some point he must have thought I could assist him in putting his record company together. He was upset with the way record companies were treating him. You know? With the computation of his royalties etc. So he wanted to try and do it himself. That was the basis upon which we put together Phrase Text Records.
- L Have you kept up with Ornette in the 80's? Have you remained friends?
- M I would say that we are friends. But there still exists a problem between us that I am trying to resolve. I can't let it go. It has such significance to me.

- L Was Ornette busy composing in the time that you represented him?
- M He was working on the recording and doing a lot of rehearsing with Prime Time. It was the beginning of a good relationship with Ornette. I had known him since 1969 where I met him in London walking down the street with Dizzy Reece. He was in London to buy a plastic Alto Saxophone.
- L Was that after the Art Ensemble and Braxton had gone to Europe?
- M Yes. They were still in Paris. I suggested to Ornette that he look them up when he got to Paris. I gave him the Art Ensemble's phone number. He was going there from London. He went to Paris and did a triple bill concert with his group, the Art Ensemble and the Creative Construction Company. It was all a hook-up you know? And here I am in 1992 living with and managing Mr. Blackwell!