



**B**OWIE was born in 1941, brought up in Little Rock, Arkansas, and St Louis, Missouri, and began playing at the age of five. At sixteen he led a youth group in St. Louis and used to practice his trumpet by an open window in the hope that Louis Armstrong might pass by and discover him.

After military service he worked with r&b bands and also with his wife, singer Fontella Bass. He played on r&b sessions for Chess Records and also helped to form BAG (Black Artists Group) and the Great Black Music Orchestra in St Louis. In 1996 he moved to Chicago, got involved with AACM, Association for the Advancement of Creative Music, and joined the band of saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell. In the later 1960s he and Mitchell were founder-members of the Art Ensemble Of Chicago, one of the key groups of the 1970s and '80s. In 1969 Bowie recorded with Archie Shepp, Sunny Murray, Jimmy Lyons and Cecil Taylor, among others. He has also done intermittent solo projects and recordings over the years. He composed, conducted and recorded 'Gettin' To know Y'All' with the fifty-piece Baden-Baden Free jazz Orchestra in 1969, performing it again

# The JAZZ connections

Interview by Olakunle Tejuoso

at the 1970 Frankfurt jazz festival. In 1974 he toured Senegal, performing with African drummers and in 1979 played a New York concert with his 59-piece Sho Nuff Orchestra. He has also recorded with Jack DeJohnette and Fela Kuti.

GR: How do you define jazz and what is this emphasis on Great Black music?

**Interview with Lester Bowie was recorded in September, 1997 in Brooklyn, New York.**

L.B: You see, Jazz is Great Black music, just as Gospel and Afrobeat is great black music.

What we are trying to do today by the term great black music is to put emphasis on the quality of music that Black people have created in this world. I mean this music is so great that each one of its subdivisions has influenced the whole world... rock n roll, blues, jazz, gospel, each one is a division of this music but actually all coming from the same thing. The thing about jazz is that it fuses all these different elements together. In fact, jazz is becoming the first world music. It is the contemporary music of this planet at this time. Therefore, it is very important for our people to know that out of everything happening to us on the planet, we have still maintained the pinnacle of culture. We still have that, this civilising force, this music. Our art has survived because there was a time when we were running this planet, another time when yellow people were running it, everyone has had their time but our culture has survived and is still influencing the culture of today. We just do not realise it... just like in Zaire, they go in there and take everything out of Zaire, not leaving nothing which is exactly what is happening to music, they take from the music and we ourselves do not realise the power that we have. So what we try to do with our music is to make people aware of the power of the music and the power it represents as far as how we can influence our thinking because in Africa art was not separated from life, it was a part of it, you learn from the culture. This is how you learned how to think, the ceremonies, the rituals, the whole sequence of growth to maturity but you see we have gotten away from that. The Western world says that art is something you put on the wall... art for art's sake! You see art has got to have meaning, there must be a connection, it has to be a part of our every day lives, we are supposed to learn from our culture, it is not something we see and just go dancing. Why are we dancing? What is the history of dance? What does it mean? We have to see how it connects to our lives, then we can apply it to our lives, consequently we will think much better

and more clearly and hopefully we can get something done. So, Great Black music is the total embodiment of our music... and what we in jazz have done is to try to bring all these different elements together because they were all separated. For there was a time when I was growing up, black people listened to all kinds of music, rhythm, blues, Duke Ellington. Which is why we in Brass Fantasy, we in our music bring back all sorts of things that they do not want us to do, bringing back reggae, we have good Marley stuff. But we really want to show the importance of this because you know music inspires you to think, it enhances your intelligence, it gets the real blues in your head. I was speaking to Sun Ra and he says people were asking him why his music gives people a headache... Sun Ra says you know when you run and have not run for a long time... your legs become sore, he says this is the same thing with your head, people have not been using their brains so when they hear my music their head starts hurting. Of course, because his music is stimulating, which is what it is all about.

GR: I am glad you mention Sun Ra. As there is a new publication about him and his early life... Sun Ra was always made to be an eccentric. You knew him, what kind of man was he?

LB: Sun Ra was definitely for real. Sun Ra was





great. Sun Ra went from the '30's with Fletcher Henderson's music to today and he never tried to be commercial and was always into the music, he was into space, into thought, language, culture - Sun Ra inspired us, he was like our father. We would watch Sun Ra in those days and say to ourselves, oh! Sun Ra was doing these things and we saw him continue all the way to the time he died, always looking forward never looking back. He had done more, because if you study an average musician, they usually may do something in their 30's and for the rest of their lives probably do something that sounds like that. In Sun Ra's case he went from the 30's, 40's, 50's, 60's, 70's, 80's and 90's and was all the time creating new stuff.

GR: Does this have anything to do with genius? I recall that great musicians like Miles Davis, Fela, Coltrane, they never went back into the music per se, they never repeat their stuff.

LB: You must realise that there is no reason to go back. You do not go back, you have got to go forward which is the problem we have now with the music... you see the whiteman is trying to turn the music backwards. He has got all these young boys running around trying to

play like they are Miles Davis and there is nothing happening.

GR: What was the concept behind the AACM of Chicago because I know you are not from Chicago.

LB: No, I am from St. Louis but lived in Chicago when we first started the collective AACM. The AACM was put together so we could play the music that we felt.

GR: Who were the originators?

LB: Originally they were, Muhal Richard Abrams, Malachi Flavors, Jodi Christian and Phillip Cochrane. They came out of an experimental band that Richard Abrams had in 1961 which was sort of an outgrowth of a concept that Sun Ra had in the 50's. Richard Abram started this experimental band because Sun Ra had left Chicago by then to the East Coast, to probably New York/Philadelphia. So, out of this experimental band grew the AACM, which was officially chartered in 1965. The idea behind this organisation was to be able to keep our music intact, to be able to develop our music, to be able to research our music and at the time no one was allowing us to do this. So we decided that if we get together, we could organise ourselves to

present our own concerts, get a place where we could develop and practice our arrangements and make music that means something and carry on this concept we are talking about.

GR: How did you guys plan to make records, since you were all rebelling against the system? What labels were you dealing with?

LB: We started off with some companies in the US, with a company called Delmark and another called Nesa, where we recorded before we left for Europe. After getting to Europe we started with the European companies in '69. So we started in 1965, my band the Art Ensemble of Chicago made their first record in 1966, that is, the Roscoe Mitchell Sextet.

GR: You mean the original Art Ensemble of Chicago?

LB: Oh huh... it was me, Roscoe Mitchell, Malachi Favors, a drummer Phillip Wilson before Famadou Don Moye joined us in 1970. We had drummer Phillip Wilson for a while but he left to join Paul Butterfield's Blues Band in 1969, so for a while we played without a drummer and maintained this situation until we got to Europe.

GR: You played without a drummer. Was this part of the concept? It sounds unlike the jazz we know.

LB: Yeah! well the concept was that the music did not depend upon any specific instrumentation. It was about the feeling and the spirit of what we were doing. A spirit of music that did not depend on whether we had a trumpet etc, the spirit of the music transcended all the instrument details and formats possible.

GR: What was the idea behind the masks and drama?

LB: The mask is an outgrowth of the African tradition. When you do the mask, you become... you are not yourself any more. You become part of the music and the mask is the same with the white lab coat I wear. We all do something special to become part of the music, like in an African ceremony. It is just

part of the art, the music. That is the whole idea, we just wanted to become part of the music.

GR: So, we can say that the AACM had the issue of their African heritage as a focus. It was not about playing fine ballroom tunes but going back to the roots...

LB: Yeah! right, going back to the roots of everything. It is not just about music which is the problem with what we have now. Music is life and not just about hearing a certain amount of songs and learning a certain repertoire and bang! then you think you are a musician. That has nothing to do with jazz, which is why these young guys are not playing anything. There is no feeling no soul to what they are doing.

GR: So, going back to the AACM.

LB: Yeah! it began to evolve, different groups grew and we all started working together and we really started to develop the music. I mean I became the president of the AACM in 1968 and had concerts every night. We just did not care whether at concerts we had one person or two people, we did concerts every night and rehearsed all day and had all kinds of

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different groups and combinations. We organised ourselves so that we could research the music. We were reading, studying, playing and teaching kids hanging over... it was not about us doing songs, we were trying to make everything relate to the whole situation at the time, we wanted to show that if you wanted to get something done, you had to do it yourself, you just cannot wait for someone to give you something.

GR: What was the reaction? How did the audience respond?

LB: Oh, we had a great audience in Chicago, as they all understood what we were doing.



A small, but great audience, very enthusiastic. As the word started to get out, we started to go out to spread this thought around the world.

GR: From Chicago, I take it you moved to Europe?

LB: Yes, in '69 we moved to Paris.

GR: What was the response like to your music in Europe?

LB: I tell you, before we left to Europe we were working about four concerts a year with the Art Ensemble of Chicago, that is, in the US you have to understand we were not playing in the acceptable format and they knew we were about something also, that we were about something meaningful!

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GR: This is always the problem.

LB: Yeah! Always is. But we got to Paris and after three days, we were playing in a theatre six nights a week.

GR: What then is the difference between the European and American audience?

LB: The difference is simple. There were no black people over there. Which means they can learn from it. They do not need to worry about this problem of waking up the 20/30 million people of this country. In the US the authority is afraid of waking these people up. Because we are asleep. Black people are asleep and they do not want us to wake up. Do not stimulate their minds. But in Europe, they do not have the Black people. When I am in Europe, they ask, well isn't it better over here for your music? I answer by saying, well if you have 30 million blacks over here we will see how much music you'll like then. You know! So it is not that they are any different, it is just that they do not have to worry, they

can benefit from the music.

GR: How then do you African-American jazz musicians deal with this attitude? Does it make your music more progressive?

LB: It is difficult and very, very frustrating because we have to really concentrate and focus to even stay on the music because you have everything saying to your face, don't do it... it is not worth it.

GR: Do you then blame fellow musicians that go popular and commercial? This is a problem we face with musicians in Africa particularly in Nigeria where they refuse to practise with their instruments but go for the quick buck.

LB: Yeah! Yeah! Right! Well you see it is because they are afraid. Music is very difficult and when you start talking about getting into jazz, it takes a lot of studying and a lot of practise. So, yes it is easier to go commercial but for some of us, serious stuff is the only way. I am not interested in just being commercial. I have done very well. I have my family who have been very supportive. I am not making a lot of commercial money but we survive and can continue just like this.

GR: Who is Joseph Bowie, any relation of yours? Are you from a musical family?

LB: That is my brother, my youngest brother. My father, 92 years old, was a high school band director for many years and played trumpet, his father played trombone and his father before him played the organ, so music has been in my family. Both my brothers are musicians and my father's brothers were musicians. So, it is in the blood. Even in slavery, in the 1800's whenever there was an affair it would be members of my family getting a band together.

GR: How do you respond to Contemporary African Music? How does your technical ear and mind respond?

LB: We can hear all the connections, as jazz is an African music, you see music is not necessarily a set of defined rules of songs or rhythms, it is a whole concept. You have to respond when you hear African music, there is a connection. If you notice, Dizzy Gillespie

made the connection between Afro-Cuban music and brought credit to the music. There was the AACM doing the whole African thing. All of a sudden, these guys got paint on their faces and masks and were trying to say yes, we are real, we are proud of our heritage, this is our culture, we are proud of Africa and they have kept us separated for so long, we have to get it together and so we have started to bring it back into the music, to show just how African this is and in turn Africa would look at what we're doing and say oh! man so that is how you have to develop. I remember I used to tell Fela. I used to say man! you need more time to practise. But you see he had all these wives and people around him

Nigeria?

LB: Spirit! its the spirit. I just woke up and went to Lagos. That's it! I did not know anyone in Lagos at all... You see! I have this thing, usually I'd do things when I want to do something...

GR: What year was that?

LB: This was like 1977, the year, I think right after Festac and I had always wanted to go to Africa. This was my first time. We had been trying to get gigs in Africa man! for about 20 years... we had played France, Italy and over... I said I'm gonna go, fuck it! I don't have any money, but I will get a one way ticket and go. I had a 100 dollars when



and a lot of responsibility. He did not have the time, I mean he really wanted to spend time on his saxophones. When we were together we practised but he really wanted to spend more time to develop his music more than he did, because he knew the power of the music and that was what he was doing, he was using his music as a way to bring people together and look at how many people are into Fela now, you know what I mean?

GR: Hm. Fela. It's difficult not to digress to Fela. You were in Lagos. What brought you to

I got off the plane and I went to Hotel Bobby. Somebody said stay at Hotel Bobby. I spent 10 dollars to get to Hotel Bobby, when I got there the room was 50 dollars so I had enough money for one night. It was about 10 o'clock at night then and I did not know anyone at all, no idea, no way back home and no more money. So I went up to the restaurant at Hotel Bobby and asked for something to eat and they tried to give me something like fried rice, I said I did not come all the way to Africa to eat fried rice. I said what do they eat here and just at that moment I saw somebody in the

kitchen eating... I said what are they eating back there? Oh! they said, that is African food, you cannot eat this. Then I said bring me some of that shit... but its hot!... I said I love hot pepper, bring some of that stuff. So after eating we started talking and I told them my situation. So one of them said you came all the way over here and you do not have any money. Just to see! You have got to go see Fela. So the next day I asked how much was the fare? They said you just get a taxi and tell them to take you to Fela and so I got a cab and went to Fela. At the time Fela was staying at Crossroads hotel because they had burnt the house down. The cab pulls up at the Crossroads, so I get out my horns, I had a couple records and some little shit to show who I was

wanted to see how I could play so man he put it on and you know me man I'm telling you I don't know anybody! and I'm playing my fucking horn... man! Bam! and after I played about a minute Fela said stop! and said to the guys, go to the hotel and get his bags, he's moving in with me... (laughter). So, I was Fela's only guest for the next six months. I was with him through all the trials, up until he was exiled to Ghana. We were playing all the time and made three records together.

GR: What was it like being with him? What was the experience like?

LB: Oh! it helped me so much. Fela was cool, he was really cool... you see one thing about me and musicians is that if they are really serious and honest to themselves I'll never really have any problem with them. Fela and I hit it off from the beginning and Fela would say, you have come to Africa; okay I'm gonna teach you how to be African, man! I'm gonna show you what it is like. You want to come over here, you want to get a band or whatever... I'm going to show you everything you need to know about being an African man. So, that is what I learnt. I sat and watched Fela through all the shit, all the wives and everything. I mean I learnt a whole lot by just watching him. That's why when I came back I got married again to just one wife... (laughs) because up until then I always thought I needed to have two wives. I learned a lot, got to hang with all the people... I mean his mum was still alive then too. She had a hip disorder because they threw her out the window... but she was still alive and so Fela really just brought me in and just treated me like a brother and not only Fela but everyone in the band. I would go around and talk and play with almost everybody.

GR: What's your impression about Afro-beat?

LB: Yeah! I even wrote an Afro-beat song ... I like it. Right after that, I recorded it out of an Italian label. It is wonderful man! how black people can just take the same four beats and turn it around to give an entirely different meaning, same four beats but just different emphasis. So it was really exciting music. Fela was incorporating all these jazz forms, he

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and a little guy comes up to me and says hey man! what have you got in there you look like a trumpeter, he said where are you from? I said New York... you play jazz? I said yeah!

GR: Who was this asking you?

LB: I forget his name, he used to play guitar for Fela's band. He said well er... so you play jazz then! And I said well er yeah. He said you must be heavy and I said well you know... a little bit... he then said well you have come to the right place. I asked why is that and he said because we are the baddest band in Africa (laughs). From there he took me to see Fela. Fela came out, he was sleeping. Now Fela knew about me from when he was living in Los Angeles. Fela says hey! Lester Bowie! He tells the guy to go get his record player and he had on this record that you know would play just the rhythm section; he had the saxophone on and so he

was really bringing this music to Nigeria, bringing in all his intellect to the music. He was always thinking ahead. People up here loved him. When he used to come to New York I will go up there and play with him. He will always shock em he shocked the shit out of the New Yorkers... because Fela would be playing and all of a sudden bring me up on stage.... And everyone out there would be saying what is he doing up there? What is the connection? They are afraid of that connection you see.

GR: It also seems that the younger musicians don't even want to make the connection at all.

LB: Yeah! Yeah! all so technical... you see the white man is all so afraid that if we ever get our shit together that we are going to seek revenge. He has done so much wrong and spilled so much blood that he thinks that everyone is seeking revenge. But you see we have been through that with all our great civilisations of the past, we are very much above that. We do not have the time to be thinking about this. I do not have the time to hate anybody. He cannot believe that people are not interested in revenge and so he does not want us to develop.

GR: What do you think of the newer generation of jazz musicians. The so called neo-traditionalists?

LB: They do not even want to acknowledge that the music is African.

GR: Do they have that traditional respect for the masters of the past? Do they come over to exchange ideas?

LB: No! No! They don't really come around. They are afraid of musicians like myself, they are afraid that if they talk to me they might loose their contract or something. You see these young guys are not doing anything in their music. They go back to try to play some shit that was played in America in the 50's/60's. They talk about trying to revive the traditions. They are not reviving anything. Music has to be contemporary, it has to be up to date. It has to relate to today which is what the whole jazz is about. It is not about a repertoire, which is what they are saying

where everybody learns these songs and technique and chord. You know! music with no soul, how can you play music with no soul. Music is soul.

GR: But they go to the best music schools in the world.

LB: And they are taught by other teachers who cannot make it and were never musicians themselves. These guys who teach them have never spent time on the road, they do not know what it is like to have the music, they live teaching school, they just work for their salaries which is why these young guys don't have any voice, they just teach 'em technique, not about what the music really means.

GR: But some are becoming spokesmen for the future of jazz.

LB: I know, yeah! they make them spokesmen. You know, Elijah Mohammed used to say that if you want to keep people confused, you have got to make the bottom the top and the top the bottom. So, the most serious, most studied musician put them at the bottom. That is, the ones that work the hardest and talk about the spirit and soul of the music and then these young guys that don't know anything would be made the spokespersons and this goes on in everything.

GR: Well, which one of these kids moves you the most?

LB: The only one I really like is probably James Carter. He has the potential to do other things. They did not want to acknowledge him for a long time. When he came to New York he worked with me in an organ group called The New York Organ Ensemble with Amina Myers playing organ, Frank Lacy, James Carter and myself on the horn, Kelvin Baylor on the guitar and Famoudou Don Moye on drums. James Carter was just so good and if you keep on what you're doing, pretty soon, you will get your break which is how it happened for James. He got a break because he was so much better than these groups that they kept on saying were good. You see, that is another thing we have to learn, there is just no easy way out. As musicians we must learn that if we are serious and true to the music the gods



will take care of us. We do not have to worry about getting this money all the time because you still end up getting broke anyway. So life is about what you do and who you are and what contribution you make. I went to Nigeria with no money just as I went to Jamaica before that where I lived for two years. Out there I used to go to Bob Marley's house, play with all the musicians and smoke reefers. It was great.

GR: How many of you make up the Art Ensemble of Chicago now?

LB: There are four of us now, originally five. The oldest of us is Malachi Flavors, the bass player. Malachi, as matter of fact was seventy years old this month (September). In fact, we have just finished a European tour and we go back again on the 4th of November for another European tour.

GR: So going back again, you seem have a better reception out there?

LB: Oh yeah! You see people like it here, but

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the people in management try to keep us away. It is always what they want. But when we do play, I mean we played in Seattle just a few weeks ago to 3000 people, the whole Opera house was completely full. So people do want to see us.

GR: Lester, you have lived and played the times in jazz and have probably been around to get to know guys like Monk, Coltrane etc. What do these musicians leave on a person like you?

LB: You see what we learn from Miles, Trane and Monk is to always look ahead. Like with Sun Ra, these guys never stood still, they kept looking for something else, they kept develop-

ing on and on and you see what we did was to just keep on from where they left. We just utilised all the elements, the African elements and every element we could think of but we were inspired by guys like Coltrane. You know Trane could play the similar song but choose to develop something on a higher level.

GR: Were they just playing, did they have an understanding of their heritage also?

LB: Oh no! these guys knew their heritage. Coltrane, Monk oh! These guys really understood their culture, you ought to see some pictures of Charlie Parker in paint. Have you ever seen some of these pictures with his face painted, African style? They were black musicians into it, trying to develop the music to another level and that is what they told us to do. I mean the tradition of the music is constant development, constant creativity, redevelopment... you have to keep on searching. Which is the problem today all the kids are just playing standards, to keep the culture the same. If you keep the culture the same you can control the people... as long as they can control your culture men! That's all they want!!

GR: So finally where is the energy of the next movement?

LB: Things are beginning to happen as we saw in the 3000 people at Washington, they were looking for something, and wanted to have the stuff. You see we are working more and more even though we are not with a big company/label but over the years we have developed a following, so now it is getting to the point where we can start doing some things we thought about doing years ago. A good example is Brass Fantasy which was an idea I had thirty years ago, in the '60's but I did not get to realise it until the '80's. This happens a lot because we do not make enough money to really develop the music the way we want to.

GR: What about African-American entrepreneurs? Don't they like jazz enough to invest in its development?

LB: That is right, we cannot keep blaming the

white establishment. What about ourselves... but you see we've been brainwashed, so that the people that have the money do not know anything about these problems. Its very difficult because we've been trained to look down on the music. The church people look down on the blues, even the black university don't want to hear any jazz. The black university look away from the music.

GR: In Nigeria the rich are beginning to invest in musical institutions to develop interest primarily in classical music. They think this is the right direction to go.

LB: That's what I mean, the people that have the money are the ones that do the wrong things, because they do not have it in their heads. They were not exposed to it when they were young, they do not have an idea of the importance of black music, it is more trying to be like the white man than anything else. It is funny because classical music, in many ways is black music too, as we are the ones that invented the scales. Music was not invented in Europe, as you know, we were playing music in Africa thousands of years before Europe... all musical scales originated from Africa and if you ever studied Paul Robeson he used to show the connection between Mozart, Beethoven and traditional African melodies. I mean I like all kinds of music, to read classical music is okay but you must remember that, it is a music of a certain period that is gone, which is the same concept they are trying to apply to jazz where they are trying to kill it, to make it dead. They do not want it to be alive and growing.

GR: How then do we explain the love of the establishment for a man like Miles Davis?

LB: Well, you see Miles was the man. Miles told them to kiss his

ass and that he was going to play this music the way he felt. Which is the thing that a lot of us learnt from that time. Miles would always tell the truth, he was probably the most honest person I've ever met... I used to go see him personally, I mean I would go to his house and talk for hours.

GR: Let us talk about Downbeat's No.1, Wynton Marsalis. Do these guys pay respect?

LB: Huh! You see Wynton is the key. He is the person they use to stop the music, he has helped destroy the music. Oh! yeah. Now what's happening is that all his younger contemporaries are not making any money or making a living or being accepted throughout the world because they are not doing anything. The only one making any money is Wynton. You see most of the world know about music and are waiting for new things to happen but these guys are not working.

GR: Wynton's latest work has just won him the Pulitzer prize. What do you think about 'Blood on the Field'?

LB: Amateur man! That's not writing. I went to see it in Rome, we called it Blood on the stage! Men! its like college writing, really really basic, not advanced at all. How can you win a prize with this... you see this is what they do. I know guys that write and arrange for a living that are great but nobody knows who they are and here this guy comes with his first big project and he goddam wins the Pulitzer prize. There is nothing there technically, it is like a little imitation Duke, little snatches of Mingus and of this and that. If you want to hear some original music go listen to Sun Ra or Muhal Richard Abrams... now yeah! they can write, you see to me now the Pulitzer prize don't mean shit, I mean half the audience in Rome left at the intermission... I had to leave too.

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