

Walton tunes, “Martha’s Prize” and “Sixth Avenue,” as well as the Wes number, bring out Green’s innate ability to retain a sense of melodicism even at a breakneck pace, while the somewhat more reserved rhythmic swingers “Down Under” (by Freddie Hubbard) and “Chant” (Duke

Pearson) best showcase the trio’s tightness and group commitment. There is only one Green original here, “Pittsburgh Brethren,” and it, too, serves as a showcase for each player while staying on course as a start-to-finish dazzler.

JEFF TAMARKIN

NICOLE MITCHELL

MANDORLA AWAKENING II: EMERGING WORLDS (FPE)



Recorded live in Chicago and performed in 2015, in conjunction with the 50th anniversary celebration of the AACM, *Mandorla Awakening II* is a resplendent reminder of why that organization’s ethos remains so invaluable. It is ambitious, adventuresome, defiant of genres and conventional wisdom and wildly dynamic. Its ability to be astral-etheral and grassroots folky in its sensibility—sometimes within the same tune—makes it a kindred spirit to the Art Ensemble of Chicago’s essential *Live in Paris*, from 1969.

Nicole Mitchell was president of the AACM from 2009–’10, before taking a teaching job at the University of California, Irvine, in 2011. She is undoubtedly one of the top flutists in jazz, and no fewer than four of the 10 songs here are righteous showcases for her, sometimes in thrilling tandem with Kojiro Umezaki on *shakuhachi*, the traditional Japanese bamboo flute. There are no other “horns”—winds, reeds or brass—among the other six members of Mitchell’s Black Earth Ensemble, but the collective energy is plenty robust.

Mandorla Awakening II is the second live performance to play off of Mitchell’s sci-fi novella of the same name. (The first, a different work with different personnel, happened in L.A. in 2013 and has yet to be released.) The overly reductive synopsis is that the novella’s about the merging of dystopia and utopia. For jazzheads, the plot matters less than the inspiration: “Egoes War” may be dystopian, but the immense force brought by Alex Wing’s electric guitar and the maelstrom of strings and effects is enjoyably stupendous. Throughout the 74-minute work, Mitchell’s arrangements balance compelling solos with piquant instrumentation—after Mitchell and Umezaki cavort like butterflies to open “Dance of Many Hands,” thunderous *taiko* drums from

Tatsu Aoki usher in a transition eventually resolved by Tomeka Reid’s glistening cello solo. Near the end of the performance, vocalist Avery Young bursts through with shout-song gospel testimony on “Staircase Struggle.” He’s an acquired taste but patience pays off on “Shiny Divider,” which starts as a chamber blues with rich strings that the fervid vocals help goose into a sinuous Bollywood-to-Broadway revue, on to gospel and through to fusion-funk.

Mandorla Awakening II is a sprawling work whose reach occasionally exceeds its grasp. But Mitchell creates enough profound moments to obliterate nitpicks over its minor foibles.

BRITT ROBSON



► “Ambitious, adventuresome, wildly dynamic”: Nicole Mitchell



THE JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER ORCHESTRA WITH WYNTON MARSALIS FEATURING JON BATISTE

THE MUSIC OF JOHN LEWIS (Blue Engine)



When this live album was recorded at New York’s Frederick P. Rose Hall in 2013, Jon Batiste was a respected young

pianist from New Orleans. Four years later, he’s that and the leader of a late-night talk-show band on a major network. His name recognition may have gone up, but it’s doubtful you’ll find him playing music like this—a stately set of nine compositions by John Lewis, with support from the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, in typically polished form—on Colbert too often.

Lewis and his Modern Jazz Quartet’s unique mix of rootsy blues and classical ambition is well suited to the JLCO’s repertory approach. All the same, the best moments here are the simplest. The opening “2 Degrees East, 3 Degrees West” keeps its early focus on Victor Goines’ expansive clarinet and Doug Wamble’s guitar, which sounds like it came straight from the swamp even before he applies a bottleneck slide. Batiste follows with a solo that zeroes in at first on a few short phrases, then a few notes, and then at last one note repeated over and over—a miniature clinic in the application of dynamics and the delicacy of touch.

Taking central position here are “La Cantatrice,” “Piazza Navona,” “Pulcinella” and “Spanish Steps,” from the MJQ’s 1962 suite *The Comedy*. One senses a case is being made for this as a major work, and the effort isn’t entirely successful; although the main theme of “Pulcinella” has an appealing spookiness, these pieces are just too all-over-the-place, with different styles, time signatures and tempos running into each other in herky-jerky fashion. “Delaunay’s Dilemma” is more satisfying, as Ted Nash’s alto saxophone slyly traces the outer fringes of the harmony. And Batiste’s unaccompanied take on “Django” is another standout, dizzying in its Rachmaninoff-ian romanticism.

MAC RANDALL

MICHAEL JACKSON