Akua Dixon

PLAYING WITH POWER

BY DAN OUELLETTE | PHOTO BY MARK SHELDON

At January's Jazz Connect conference in New York, a panel titled "Jukebox Jury From the Inside Out" convened, consisting of five radio programmers from across the country who appraised whether a piece of music was worthy to be played on-air at their stations. These critiques were based on a random 30-second excerpt from an upcoming recording. The programmers expressed a diverse array of opinions, ranging from keeping the jazz canon unblemished to letting new voices and new sounds be heard. About halfway through the session, a short solo cello piece was played, much to the dismay of most of the panelists, who said they would definitely not play this music on their shows.

In the audience about 30 rows back, Akua Dixon listened to her sublime cello solo segment of her original composition "Orion's Gait" (playful and swinging in its full form as a quartet number), which appears on her compelling new album, *Akua's Dance*. After the panel ended, Dixon shrugged and graciously said, "Well, it's interesting to hear the different points of view." As she was leaving the room, several attendees—bookers, radio programmers, fans—rushed up to her and asked for her card.

Two days later, sitting in her luthier's living room on the Upper West Side (the walls in Lukasz Wronski's multi-room apartment are lined from floor to ceiling with an array of stringed instruments), Dixon was a bit more diplomatic, then feisty about what had taken place. "You can't be thin-skinned to have the career I've had," she said. Her lengthy résumé includes a stint playing in pit bands at the Apollo Theater (for James Brown, Barry White and Dionne Warwick, among others), performing in pit bands on Broadway (for shows such as *Liza with a Z*, *Cats* and *Dream Girls*), tours with Max Roach's bebopping Double Quartet and Archie Shepp's Attica Blues Big Band, co-founding the groundbreaking Quartette Indigo and recording three albums as a leader.


Akua Dixon is writing an opera about Marie Laveau (1801–'81).

"I don't expect everyone on this planet to like my music, just like some people hate Italian or Chinese food," she said. "But my cello playing has certainly been documented. I started recording in the late '60s, [and I've] showed what I can do on the cello."

And her reaction to the Jazz Connect panel? "I don't think they know what they're talking about," she adamantly said. "These people program music with saxophones, trumpets, guitars, organs, even vibraphones. Maybe violin, but otherwise no strings. The arco cello is not common to their ears. The instrument is in the same range as a tenor saxophone, but the fact that it's stroked with a bow and the way you manipulate notes is very different than a tenor sax. The public ear for listening to cello jazz has to grow."

Even so, Dixon wonders if widespread cello awareness will ever come to pass, given that she's observed most music schools eliminating strings from their orchestras. A stringed instrument pioneer, Dixon is celebrated for her work on cello, but on *Akua's Dance* she also plays the cello's cousin, the baritone violin, on seven of 10 tracks in a quartet with nylon-string guitarist Freddie Bryant, bassist Kenny Davis and drummer Victor Lewis.

While the baritone has the same tuning as a cello, it offers a larger, deeper sound. "Not very many people have seen it," Wronski said.

"When I posted its picture on Facebook, a lot of people thought it was a Suzuki bass for a child," Dixon recalled. "But it was built by [the late luthier] Carleen Hutchins, who wanted the violin sound to go all the way through the string family. It's the first one she built, and I've owned it since 1989. I have long hands and long fingers so I can play it with power."

On *Akua's Dance*, she plays the baritone on her medium-tempo arrangement of Sade's 1985 hit "The Sweetest Taboo" and on the rumbling original "Don't Stop," which closes the style-shifting program.

Although Dixon recently moved into a cathedral-ceiling country home she bought in Rhinebeck in the upper Hudson Valley of New York, her roots are straight-up New York City. She was born in Harlem and her family moved to the Bronx when she was 6. She played piano by ear in her Baptist church. "At that time, everyone had a piano in their living room," she recalled. "We bought sheet music at Schirmer's in Midtown, then went home and practiced."

While her older sister Gayle (1947–2008) played violin, Akua gravitated to the cello for its tone quality. They both went to an elementary school that focused on the arts so that they spent half the day studying music and half the day in academics. By the time she was in junior high, Dixon was already freelancing and then attended the High School of Performing Arts, where she focused on composition and furthering her prowess on cello. (She later attended the Manhattan School of Music.) After classical gigs, the '60s jazz scene came calling. "That's when jazz musicians wanted to start using strings and experimenting with players who knew the root of the African-American jazz tradition," she said. "There were plenty of European classical music players who were stylized, but they didn't get the rhythm of jazz. Since I grew up in the Baptist church, I had a flair for that so I started freelancing for Latin groups on the Fania label and jazz people like Archie Shepp."

Her Apollo Theater pit spots at one point ballooned into as many as 23 shows a week. She fully embraced jazz and the realms of improvisational possibilities when she linked up with the Symphony of the New World, formed by activist musicians who performed works by such jazz artists as Duke Ellington. In the early '70s, Dixon moved into an influential role in violinist Noel Pointer's String Reunion, a 30-piece African-American orchestra. "Noel was the idea guy who wanted to play classical as well as African-American music," she said. "My sister, who thought like a lawyer, became president; Noel was vice president. Maxine Roach became secretary/treasurer, and since I voiced concern that we needed to encourage new compositions by black writers, I became director of new music. We were young and had a lot of energy."

The remnants of that group, including Gayle and Maxine, were enlisted by Max Roach for his Double Quartet in the early '80s. "That's where I studied bebop with one of the founders," she said. "He'd rehearse us from 9 to 5 every day. He played fast and he wanted the string phrasing to be fast. He'd record every session on a cassette, then play it back so that we could get those rhythmic hits. We did it." The Double Quartet led to Dixon later forming Quartette Indigo, which recorded two string-quartet albums, 1994's *Quartette Indigo* and 1997's *Afrika! Afrika!*

As a burgeoning arranger, Dixon scored several Broadway gigs, which eventually led to her arranging and orchestrating two of pop music's biggest hits in the late '90s: Lauryn Hill's landmark album *The Miseducation Of Lauryn Hill* and Aretha Franklin's comeback disc, *A Rose Is Still A Rose*. Dixon said she enjoyed a mutual-respect working relationship with Hill: "Lauryn was hearing something. Typically when artists want to use strings, they go to the New York Philharmonic, but they couldn't do reggae. So I came in and orchestrated in a certain way that gave her the opportunity to have her dream string section. I'm not a hip-hopper, but I am a musician who keeps her ears open."

Instead of playing Broadway or touring, Dixon took a hiatus from the scene to stay at home (Montclair, New Jersey) to raise her and (now ex-husband) trombonist Steve Turre's two children, Andromeda and Orion. "You make a sacrifice as a parent," she said. "I wanted to educate my children. I didn't expect the school to educate them. School supplements what you teach at home."

Dixon didn't record as a leader of her own group until 2011, saying that people at her infrequent shows were requesting her originals in addition to her classical repertoire. She recorded the string-fueled *Moving On*, and followed that with *Akua Dixon*, a quartet-oriented album that enlisted old violinist friend John Blake Jr. and featured Regina Carter. (Dixon said linking up with her was "major for me after losing my sister Gayle.")

Notable jazz cello pioneers include Oscar Pettiford, who played cello (albeit in bass tuning), and Ron Carter, whose 1961 debut album, *Where?*, was largely a cello-infused affair. Dixon explained that "going from being a classical cellist to a jazz cellist is a journey. One of the things I had to learn was how to use the instrument to make my music dance. As a front player, I knew that playing in an African-American setting, people were going to want to get up and dance."

She also noted that, just as the Jazz Connect panel had indicated, many listeners eschew low-end string instruments in a solo setting. In other words, they're better heard live than on the radio. That has proved to be a major challenge. "How do you record the cello when it's not just a background instrument?" she said. "You want to hear its timbre acoustically on a recording. Thankfully the recording process has become better as a craft. Times change, and hopefully ears grow as a result."

With *Akua's Dance*, the leader has pivoted from the string quartet zone to a standard quartet of guitar, bass and drums. In a standard string

quartet, the cello serves as the bass voice, which limits her ability to fly free with her improvisational skills. "Playing with two different rhythm sections is such a joy," she said, noting that three of her songs on the album feature guitarist Russell Malone, bassist Ron Carter and drummer Lewis. "I'm out in front as opposed to being in a section."

What's remarkable about *Akua's Dance* is the variety of music in the program, including a Dizzy Gillespie tribute, "Dizzy's Smile"; the ballad "If My Heart Could Speak To You," penned by her college classmate Aziza Miller; a moving rendition of Abbey Lincoln's "Throw It All Away" (on which Dixon contributes vocals); and the deeply soulful spiritual "I'm Gonna Tell God All My Troubles," arranged by Bryant, who brought the tune to the session based on a jazz string trio gig he did with Dixon and Davis in upstate New York.

"I like working with cellists because it complements the guitar; it's warm," Bryant said in a phone conversation. "Akua and I are very similar in our backgrounds, coming from classical and jazz. We're also deeply rooted in the African-American spirituals of church music." His connection to "I'm Gonna Tell God All My Troubles" is deep: As documented on YouTube, his mother, opera star Beatrice Rippy, sang the spiritual at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall in 1974, accompanied by her renowned pianist/husband Carroll Hollister. So he was the perfect choice to arrange the piece for the quartet.

"I grew up with spirituals," Dixon said. "My family is from the South Carolina/Georgia region and the islands, where there's the Geechee people, who have preserved the African cultural heritage. Where there was the brothel music of the brass bands in New Orleans, the history of my culture is grounded in the spirituals that were played by strings and banjo. It's a different kind of music from a different region. I see it as my responsibility to express that and to pass it on."

On *Akua's Dance*, when Dixon lined up the other quartet with Carter and Malone, she focused on the cello as opposed to the baritone violin she played on the other tracks. Asking Carter to play the low end on the album was key because she wanted to play a classic ballad and take a solo just like a saxophonist. She had run into the bass legend at an event a few years ago—they had worked together briefly on Shepp's 1972 album, *The Cry Of My People*—and he asked her what she had been up to. She sent him her first two albums. When it came time to plan for the third, she asked him if he'd be interested. "Ron is the bass player of all bass players," she said. "So I stepped outside the comfort zone to play at such a high level with him. He said yes, then asked me to send him the music. He came in so prepared. He took care of business."

One of the new album's highlights is Dixon's powerful "Afrika! Afrika!," based on a three-movement composition for solo cello and string orchestra she wrote after traveling to Ghana in 1972. She had recorded it previously with Quartette Indigo, but she knew what was missing in the arrangement: a stalwart bass line. On the new version, she was joined by Carter's low-growl arco bass and a solo by Malone.

"Akua has catchy melodies that stick in your head," Malone said over the phone. "The tunes we played on are soulful and harmonically interesting. It was great that she was able to get Ron and Victor because while they bring their own personalities to the music, they don't get in the way or overshadow her vision."

Also included on *Akua's Dance* are two compositions—the upbeat title track and the grooved "I Dream A Dream"—that are a part of an opera Dixon is composing titled *The Opera Of Marie Laveau*, about the 19th-century voodoo queen from New Orleans. "I'm finished orchestrating the first half and now I've got to complete the second half," she said.

She'll also be working on new pieces about healing, agitations and civil rights. "Music is something we all have to have, but it has to be fresh—not part of a routine and packaged in a box," she said. "I'm just going to write and play in my house and keep creatively fresh." **DB**