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OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF MUSICIANS OF THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

AKUA DIXON

COMPOSING THE FLAVOR OF HER CULTURAL HERITAGE

LOOKING FORWARD: WHAT THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION COULD MEAN FOR WORKERS, UNIONS

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FEATURE STORY
AKUA DIXON

Local 802 (New York City) jazz cellist, composer, copyist, and vocalist talks about her nearly 50-year career, the value of union pay scales, and how a performance with Duke Ellington changed her musical outlook.

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Photo: Jose Iorio

AKUA DIXON

COMPOSING THE FLAVOR OF HER CULTURAL HERITAGE

Jazz cellist and composer Akua Dixon has been playing music professionally for nearly 50 years, with world-class musicians at venues around the globe. One thing she has learned—and one thing she believes—is that you are what you hear. "The music I compose is a product of all my elements. It has elements of jazz, but it also has elements of just being raised in America," she says. "Jazz has so many subgenres that I say to myself, 'What really is jazz?' . . . Even though I studied European classical music, when I compose, the flavor of my cultural heritage comes out in my compositions."

But that cultural flavor did not blossom right away. It took years of playing professionally before she realized she was missing an important ingredient.

Dixon, a member of Local 802 (New York City) since 1977, was raised in a musical house—her parents loved music, her mother played piano, her sister played violin. She was nurtured on jazz and the gospel music of her church. She started playing cello in fourth grade, and by junior high school she was in the borough orchestra and the city-wide string orchestra, and was already playing freelance gigs.

Akua and her older sister Gayle (also a member of Local 802 until she passed away in 2008) formed a string quartet and played restaurants, weddings, and church gigs. By age 18, Akua was playing in the pit at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, earning money for college at the Manhattan School of Music. She remembers playing 23 shows in one week—and backing an array of music icons such as Barry White, Dionne Warwick, and James Brown. "That was just fantastic. James used to rent the theater and book his own stuff; lines were around the block because he had hit after hit after hit," Dixon recalls. "Getting to play with James Brown, I had to play to match his phrasing … and he's very demanding. He was very gentle and very nice … but he still wanted it poppin'."

While studying classical music at the Manhattan School, Dixon was freelancing constantly throughout New York City and the surrounding area, playing Latin, blues, and jazz. So her musical education occurred between the poles of classical instruction

Photo: Chuck Stewart

in the classroom and practical training in clubs and theater pits. The Manhattan School did not offer any courses in jazz at that time, she says, so her learning in that genre was self-taught until she met jazz master Yusef Lateef, started talking to him and reading his book on blues. She then took jazz lessons with Reggie Workman at The New Muse in Brooklyn, and studied with renowned cellist Benar Heifetz.

As a professional, Dixon freelanced a lot, worked often with her sister in string quartets, worked in Broadway pits, and toured with the Max Roach Double Quartet, among a long list of gigs. "We were usually the only African-Americans [in the ensemble], and in a lot of cases on these jobs, it wasn't easy. But my father said when I went to school and I felt I wasn't being treated properly for those same reasons, he said, 'You're only going there for the education.' And I just kept plodding through; you have to do what you have to do just to learn," she says. "And when I got these jobs, that's what I had to do: did the job and kept moving on."

Luckily for Dixon, she is not only a cellist, but also a composer, arranger, copyist, and vocalist, so she was never dependent on just one person or just one job, she says. "I wound up always being on a musical trail that gave me music not only as a passion but also as a vocation that, at the same time, gave me the ability to live and support myself."

Photo: Alexis Rotter

Dixon ultimately found a home in the Symphony of the New World, one of the first racially integrated orchestras in the US, and it was there that she found the missing ingredient to her ultimate composing flavor. While performing in a concert with Duke Ellington, Dixon realized she knew less about the music of her own culture than of European music. "I decided I wanted to balance that," she says. "I started immersing myself in jazz and spirituals and became determined to learn the secrets of improvising."

Since then, Dixon has not only blazed a path of success as both a classical and jazz cellist, but also as a composer, conductor, and educator. She has played, written for, and collaborated with numerous jazz greats; formed the groundbreaking ensemble Quartette Indigo; notated and conducted a ballet; and composed an opera. One of the highlights of her career occurred during this time, when she fulfilled her childhood dream of working with Aretha Franklin.

"It was at the Nassau Coliseum. The string section was only familiar with European classical music. My sister and I were the only two that knew the improvisational aspect of African-American music. There's inflections in the rhythm of the music and freedoms that she couldn't have, couldn't do, because of the limitations of the knowledge of the string section—this is my opinion. So I had a passion. I said to myself, 'Boy, I would do anything to work with Aretha Franklin. I would even write the parts for free and pick the string players.' And that dream did get to come true."

Dixon wrote the string arrangement for the 1998 song "A Rose is Still a Rose," played on the recording, and performed it live with Aretha on *The Late Show with David Letterman* and in several other venues. "So as a kid, dreaming of playing with her, and then actually getting the opportunity to play with her, it was major for me," she says. "And when I talk about string sections like this, if I hadn't had the opportunity to study at the Apollo, and learn that music, and have to play it that many times in a row week in and out, I wouldn't have gotten to know it as well as I do; it's a different situation than playing in a European classical ensemble."

Dixon has also dedicated years of her life to music education. She has worked as a Musical Ambassador to New York City for Carnegie Hall Education and performing for their Neighborhood Concert Series as well as Jazz at Lincoln Center's Jazz in the Schools tours. She also developed the Hip Hop Blues Project and composed an original work for string students in New York and New Jersey to perform each year. Dixon says she loves teaching music, especially in inner-city schools, where the children of color get to see a successful musician who actually looks like them. "They don't see themselves in orchestras and in other industry areas today as much as they should. It's exciting for them to see somebody that looks like me and accomplish what I'm accomplishing," she says.

But these accomplishments did not come easy. Being a woman, and Black, and play-

(Continued on page 12...)

Photo: Chuck Stewart

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Akua Dixon

(...continued from page 11)

ing something as unusual as jazz cello held a lot of challenges for Dixon. "The liberties people take against women in this business are a trip," she says wryly. "I've been paid less because I'm a woman, been asked to play for no salary, had my name left off the program—many times—and had my name left off the recordings I did. And it wasn't even thought about."

"But I had a good lesson from [jazz singer] Betty Carter: Don't take no crap," Dixon adds with a laugh. "She didn't say that, but we all know she didn't take any."

One of the most common questions Dixon receives from her female students, she says, is how to be a successful working mom. Dixon was working steady gigs on Broadway when she started a family. She decided to take a break from full-time music and focus on raising her kids—and also do more writing and creating, which got "bottled up" by playing the same music night after night on Broadway. "If you truly want children, it's an experience unlike any other and, to me, was worth what some would call professional sacrifices," she says. "As a working mother, you will have to make serious choices about your time. You will not have any time to waste. Focus on your ultimate goal and what you need to do to accomplish that for your children and your career."

Things have changed a lot for female and Black musicians since she came up in the 1960s and 70s, and Dixon gives a lot of credit for that to her union, which she joined when she worked at the Apollo Theater. One of the most important protections from the AFM is in pay scales, she says. "I'm glad [the Apollo] was a union gig because I always got paid, there was a security there, whereas a lot of times when you do clubs you might not get paid. Even if you've worked for some record companies and did recordings, I learned early on that after the record is recorded, if they don't pay you, they don't have to pay you. So I became very insistent on being paid up front."

"Working in a union environment lets me know I'm worthy of a certain treatment and salary for my wares," she continues. "There's no reason I should work for free. I went to college; I paid tuition; and the people I work with have the same credentials. And we don't work for that. But some people don't think musicians should get an equal wage because there are a lot of people who do it for fun and do it for free."

Since COVID hit, Dixon has, like everyone else, significantly reduced her performing hours, doing only occasional recording. But that does not mean she has been idle. She has been playing more piano (the first instrument she learned) and also started playing the tamboura—an Indian drone instrument that she has owned for a while but not played. "It's very meditational and calming, and I think I needed that," she says. She also spent a good part of every day in writing, whether it is notation, writing commissioned string quartet parts, or doing the final notations on her opera, *The Opera of Marie Laveau*, which she finished composing about two years ago.

Dixon says that after nearly 50 years in the union, looking back she sees how much she has depended on the AFM throughout her career. "I've seen a lot of progress since the 1970s when the change started," she says. "You had a group of people band together to form the Symphony of the New World, which had a lot of African-American players in it and as part of the foundation of the orchestra's board. To go through the legal system to try to change the hiring practices at places like the New York Philharmonic, and having an organization like Local 802 to march with you and be with you was a wonderful thing."

Photo: John Abbott

She says that recent events and changing beliefs have made it a good time to revisit these changes in the music industry. "I think that's where the world is in general right now, trying to make a more balanced place where all of us can live and work together."