Warming Up for New Harmonies: Celebrating American Roots Music

New Harmonies: Celebrating American Roots Music comes to six sites in North Carolina in 2010. The traveling exhibition is a collaboration between state humanities councils, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Federation of State Humanities Councils. The partnership, established in 1991, came about as a creative response to the challenges faced by rural museums to enhance their own cultural legacies. The host sites in the New Harmonies tour have contributed articles to preview how they will reflect on their regional roots music heritage during the tour.

Tar Heel Roots of Max Roach

Don Pendergraft, Project Director/Exhibit Design Chief, Museum of the Albemarle

“...for at this moment I am the whole reason they have existed at all.”

–Joseph Cinque, Quote from the film *Amistad* (1997)

MAX ROACH was one of the premier innovators of bebop jazz and a formidable composer. He switched the drum’s role of keeping time on the bass to the cymbal, thus freeing up the other components of the kit to really make music. This style made him a renowned percussionist who performed with Charlie “Bird” Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Coleman Hawkins, Clifford Brown, Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, and Sonny Rollins, among so many other jazz greats. Roach recorded with his own groups as well, including M’BOOM, a strictly percussion ensemble. He was highly outspoken in supporting both the civil rights movement and international struggles for independence. Most notable is “WE INSIST! FREEDOM NOW SUITE.” This album featured Abbey Lincoln with lyrics by Oscar Brown, Jr., and hosted a classic photo that commemorates the Greensboro sit-in on the front cover.

The story of Roach as one of the most important drummers in jazz history is well-documented and exists on many cultural levels, yet few are aware of his North Carolina beginnings. Roach was born on January 8, 1924, in New Land in rural Pasquotank County. New Land is named for the process of claiming farmland from the swamp, and Roach’s ancestral land lies on the southern boundary of the Great Dismal Swamp. His parents Alphonso and Cressie Roach lived in this region of Northeastern North Carolina, as their ancestors had for many generations.

It can be assumed, yet difficult to prove, that Max Roach is directly related to the free blacks listed in census records. What is certain is that Roach’s earliest recorded ancestor, his great-great-grandfather, Abraham Roach, is listed in the 1840 Census of North Carolina as a freeman living on his own farm in New Land.

The Roach family lifestyle would change in 1928 when they moved to a neighborhood in Brooklyn, NY. Roach was four years old at the time. In the 1920s-30s, many families living in rural southern and midwestern states migrated to larger northern cities. The Roaches were in search of a better economy, improved working conditions, equal opportunities, and
a better education for their children. The young Roach found himself in a strange, new urban environment.

Roach accompanied gospel bands in church at the age of ten and played with the Duke Ellington Orchestra at eighteen. He played the drums performing music, not as the traditional “timekeeper,” the drummer’s role in most forms of music. Roach’s ability was inspired and his musical knowledge immense. He was able to perform drum solos that were complete songs with a beginning, middle, and end. Roach’s performances are available for viewing on YouTube; his performance of “High-Hat” illustrates the unique way that he changed jazz. His knowledge of the drums, the historical perspective, and the improvisation he introduced by mixing-up the tempos as he perfected the bebop sound have influenced every musician who has played jazz post-Roach.

Alando Mitchell

Sarah Merritt, Executive Director, Arts Council of Wayne County

TO SAY MUSIC is Alando Mitchell’s life is an understatement. Music is the very essence of the man. A native of Wayne County, NC, the bass player and drummer was born in 1972. From the very start he was surrounded by music. His father is an accomplished guitarist and his mother plays the piano. All five of his siblings are also very musically inclined. “The stringed instrument runs in my family, the history of that is pretty thick...my great-grandfather, we found out a few years ago, played the ukulele. He played that and then my grandfather, he and all of his brothers, all of them, played guitar. And it was like ten of them, eight or ten. Every last one of them played the guitar or some type of instrument.”

Mitchell’s passion for music is infectious. Whether he’s talking about his first drum set or his work with the drum line group he founded, his eyes sparkle, his legs beat a rhythm as if a song is just going to burst out of him. He talks animatedly about his family reunions and how music was a central part of any gathering. “And the most awesome thing that I loved about our family reunion,” he will tell you, “was this great big, long porch that we had, was filled with guitars, drums, people singing. The whole porch was just filled with music. And they would play for hours. I’m talking about eight and nine hours. They would just play, and everybody would just eat, and just dance, and take turns coming up singing songs....They would just be pouring off sweat, and just playing those guitars, all of them playing at the same time.”

Mitchell started playing the drums at the tender age of three and at thirteen took up the bass guitar. Gospel is his music of choice, and as Mitchell puts it, “In our background, in our history of music and our style of music, jazz, blues, and gospel are really about the same as far as progressions and everything.” He laughs when he talks about how he and his brothers would spend their summers practicing. “I know it like to ran my mother up the wall, but she saw us developing, she heard us getting better every day, I think she pretty much enjoyed it. Sometimes she would come back and she would sing while we played.” His love of drums was further developed in school along with a close friendship with jazz drummer Alvin Atkinson.

Mitchell has never stopped playing and can be found on any Sunday playing at his church, Deeper Life Ministries in Goldsboro. Following in the footsteps of his ancestors, he and his wife have nurtured the musical talent in their children. Equally as inspirational, Mitchell has devoted his life to igniting a love of music in children of his community. Three years ago he started A Drummer’s World, a drum line program that has...