

**“Panoramic sound quilting”: On *Coin Coin* and Compositional Methods**  
**Eric Lewis interviews Matana Roberts**

Transcription by Elizabeth Johnstone

EL: I'm here with Matana Roberts, known as a composer, performer, activist, scholar...

MR: Hustler.

EL: ...hustler. [laughter] And we're going to talk a bit about your compositional methods, in particular the *Coin Coin* project, and the various ways in which you've chosen to compose and score that piece. Do you want to start by telling us a little bit about the history of this project? When did you first conceive of it? When did you start writing a few bits?

MR: The compositional narrative I first conceived about 2005. I had been, maybe five or six years previous to that, collecting information about my family history. But I come from a family that would really do the “sit around and talk about stories” sort of thing.

EL: When you started collecting the history, the narrative of your family, was it at that point already known that you wanted to integrate it into a performance piece or did that come after?

MR: No, it came later because it came out of the grief of dealing with the passing of my maternal grandmother in 2005, and having to go through her things. She was a very private person and so the method in which we were able to go through her things after she passed was really intense. And she kept everything--records, photographs, documents--of our family line on my mother's maternal and paternal side, and I realized there was more of a wealth of information than I had even realized.

EL: Was there a moment when you thought to yourself “I have to somehow integrate this into a performance”?

MR: Yes, because I had gotten to a point in New York City, as kind of an emerging artist person, where I was really dissatisfied with the things that I was doing and I felt that if I was going to do something that was personal work, that it would have to be something that I could really connect to. I realized that I could take this information as a source of connection and also create less of a sense of isolation, of the kind I was experiencing in New York at that time. It was not so much about dealing with family, but just a way of creating community with my music somehow, and that's how it kind of got started.

EL: When do you start formulating the various ways in which you integrate the narrative into the work? I mean, it would have been easy to take some of the stories and bits of history and in a linear way have musical performances about them. But what's interesting to me about *Coin Coin*, one of the things of the many things that are

interesting about it, is how the familial narratives are presented in many different ways. Some are linear, some are not linear, some are game pieces, the ensemble itself takes on different personae from your family. Do you find as you reveal new things from your family history, that forces you to think about new compositional methods for presenting them? Is there something about the family history itself?

MR: In a way I'm using it as a kind of inquisitive practice of exploring. In the entire *Coin Coin* narrative I'm exploring stories that really stuck out to me in my childhood that I wasn't sure were true, and I was interested in seeing if it was actually documented or if it's just family folklore. So there's that. But also as a composer, I wanted a way to create a system for myself to communicate the way I think about improvisation and sound, in a way that can be more understandable to a broader audience of improvisers, of musicians--that I can share with across music genres as well--and a way for me to create a compositional narrative that made sense to me because I've never understood music in the more traditional Western constructs. In dealing with that, I've studied it intensively, but it's still not the way I understand sound. I'm trying to map out a way that mirrors how I think about sound.

EL: What do you think are the challenges for coming up with a system that can be understandable for different improvisers from different musical backgrounds, and what about your system speaks to that challenge?

MR: Well, the system is ever-evolving. I call it panoramic sound quilting. I'm still trying to formalize a language. What I have found in doing this, though, is that even as specific as I try to make the language--because improvisation is so multi-layered and the players I continue to choose are really dependent on personality or personal experience--that no matter how direct I might make the symbology, it's still not what I'm going to get. So I don't know what that means. I'm constantly workshoping the work to figure it out. And I'm also, with this compositional narrative, trying to explore certain sides of my creativity that I cannot access as a saxophonist running a band. Which is what I'm used to doing. I'm able to explore a kind of fantasy world, creative things that I was interested in as I child, that I thought I really had to shut down in order to deal with the mechanical aspects of the saxophone. In *Coin Coin* I'm able to combine all these things.

EL: One thing I found interesting, on one episode of *Coin Coin* I had the pleasure of performing in, is on the one hand it's very clear that the project is your personal reception, and then filtered through your creativity, account of your family's history. But on the other hand, it's also the performers' reception of this history, right?

MR: Yes.

EL: I'm wondering has this ever produced either surprises or tensions? There are these sections where it's obviously very important that we know the narrative, that you tell it to us, what this piece is about, and often the symbols are meant to be our responses to characteristics of that episode, whatever it might be. But then, of course, it ends up

being *our* responses to that. Have you ever been surprised by how the improvisers that you've chosen have decided to sonically present a certain episode?

MR: A little bit. I find I have to be a bit careful. When I first started doing the very first segment of *Coin Coin*, I had a packet of material I would pass out with the score. Some people really relate to that, and for some people that completely shuts them down. I've noticed that I've had to present it in a more general presentation to the players so that their originality definitely will come through. Because the history is so heavy for some people, it makes them very self-conscious sometimes in the improvisation. And yes, sometimes the textures that do happen are not actually the ones I'm looking for, which is why I'm constantly trying to re-tweak the language. And I may never get exactly what I'm looking for.

EL: I know one tension I felt in performing in *Coin Coin*...obviously some of the episodes of your family history are of great perseverance, great creativity, of great nobility. Others are extremely violent and horrific episodes. I know I felt the tension between one's goal as an improviser and an artist to present something aesthetically, not pretty, but sort of nice, when it's about a horrific episode. At times I felt like "I should just be silent now." That's the response that is called for. I'm wondering how you feel performing some of these episodes that you might think are almost beyond art, that art has nothing to say? Maybe you don't agree with that.

MR: No. It's changed. It's changed even as of last week because I spent time in New Orleans. That particular segment that you performed on was about my Louisiana history. I've gone through different emotions in performing the piece, sometimes to the point of exhaustion afterwards, for instance. There is a certain kind of catharsis that occurs, but also a certain kind of joy in a weird way that I have not been able to completely pinpoint because, even though I'm talking about all the suffering, I stand here because of all of that suffering. Despite all the things that I have to go through--trying to hustle to survive on this art form--my life is good, and in performance of these pieces I'm reminded that I'm standing on the backs of all these people who never got a chance to express themselves. There is this beauty that comes from that and I see the way it relates to other people because despite having a completely different history from mine, for instance, every person can relate to an idea of human sadness, human perseverance. We have all of these things, all of these stories amongst our families--blood or not--amongst our communities, that we can relate to. But Louisiana, in particular, I want to point out, that is a history of a people who have created, who continue to create, very joyful music under the circumstances of a very dark history. So now, in performance of that piece I'm thinking about how, despite all the sadness - how, having just come back from Louisiana and seeing post-Katrina that people are still suffering in ways that they shouldn't. Yet, hanging out with these people later at various clubs or bars and seeing people just trying to have a good time, being reminded of how those two things have to balance themselves out, it transfers over to that piece for me in new ways.

EL: I'm wondering if there is any difference you've noticed, both with audiences and performers, between *Coin Coin* performances in Canada and the U.S.? Where obviously Canada has a history, like virtually all places, of racism and apartheid, the legacy of slavery is not centrally part of the Canadian experience. And we certainly relate to that history differently, whether we should or not. Is there a difference?

MR: For sure. And it's so interesting and it's one of the reasons I have enjoyed spending time in Quebec, because the history is somewhat similar in a weird kind of parallel to my Louisiana history; this French undertone that feeds into everything, and this weird religious history that feeds into everything. But that's a whole other explanation. Audience-wise, I really enjoy sharing this work with Canadian audiences because there is more love in the room for what is being shared. I have yet to have the same experience with an American audience. With European audiences there is a similar respect for the work, and maybe that's because there is a distance from the history. But I also find the way that the Afro-Canadian history and the Native Canadian history...it's a dynamic I don't totally understand...and I find the audience reaction I get is often a mirror of that. And the questions I get from Canadians are very different.

EL: How so?

MR: They're a little bit more direct about the issue in some ways. One of the last questions that I got asked at a Canadian performance was... It was an amazing performance, the room was packed. It was a cross-section of people. That's another thing I really love about audiences I've performed for in Canada: I never really know what I'm going to get. She said, "How does it feel performing this kind of work for suburban Canadian indie-rocker kids?" I didn't really know how to answer that. Because here you are as a black American woman performing this work for people who have no knowledge, no connection to this history. I guess I don't really think about that anymore in performance of this work. It's a very confusing time to be an African-American person in this world.

EL: I don't want to emphasize just the parts of *Coin Coin* that are about histories of suffering. It's obviously an integral part of the work, but by no means all of it. I've often wondered whether the differences between reactions might be that Canadian audiences are unlikely to think that their own history is being criticized, particularly if they are white Canadians. Where one could see how a white audience in the US could take this to be a kind of quite rightful criticism of their own implicitness in the history of suffering.

MR: Yes, it's interesting. There are things I've done in piece that I don't do anymore, just from doing it in the States, for instance. And actually you were really helpful with this, I think. I used to ask the audience to sing along during the slave auction. It's such a happy sounding melody, I didn't really think about it. I remember I performed it in Philly, and I have a wonderful small fan base of elder black gentlemen that will come out and see me when I play in Philly. It's like an audience of my father or something. It's so great to see. And I remember asking them to sing along and it was just quiet. I forget that I'm reminding people of a history that is not positive. But I feel in sharing this

history, sharing this music, it's so positive because I'm alive because of these slave auctions. I feel a certain sense of joy there, and I forget that that doesn't always transfer as a viewer, as a witness. There are certain things that I have to remind myself of.

EL: Well, I think that *Coin Coin* is powerful enough, and effective enough at doing what it wants to do, that it makes both the performer and the audience think about how their own history, and their own family history, intersects with the history you present. So, I think it's quite natural for someone to find themselves thinking both positive, empowering things and perhaps reminding themselves of less laudatory aspects of their own background.

MR: Yes. This is the first time I've ever experienced as a performer deep emotions from people who witness it. I have yet to perform this music where someone is not crying, and I forgot that music can do that, can have that kind of power. But I also know what's really important to me is also to remind people--because I have so many friends who come from really broken families and their family aesthetic is more about friendship--I really hope that the pieces are reminding people about the power of friendship and not so much about the familial bloodline. Because I don't see that as, even though I'm focusing on that, I guess I don't see that as as important as "family is really what you make it." It can be a family of your friends, rather than a bloodline family. My family, in particular, we're not a very close-knit sort of people. Sometimes in sharing this work I'm nervous that I'm creating some kind of braggart rights because I have all this documentation. But it's not documentation because my people were a tight-knit, sharing sort of folk.

EL: Well, it's obvious that you've done actual primary, archival research that is integrated into this piece, and that's one thing, to my knowledge at least, that really differentiates it from a lot of projects in the Afrological improvised tradition or jazz tradition, that are presenting narratives. They tend to be extremely generic narratives of the African American, or of some subset of them, but not of the individual and their family, and I really think that makes the stories presented all the more powerful. Because they are personalized. Because of the video. There are images.

MR: It's dangerous work. This is dangerous work. Sometimes I think if I had to do it over again maybe I wouldn't have made it so personal, but now I'm so deep within it there is no turning back now. I have to keep pushing forward because it's getting more and more personal. And then you realize as an artist you are toeing that line between sharing and exploitation, and you have to be careful. I haven't always been so careful in these pieces, I don't think. I battle with that.

EL: Were there any artistic precedents you looked toward, or were influenced by, in doing that sort of work? I mean the one thing I mentioned to you that strikes me is the John Carter suite. What I always find interesting about that is that by the end of that fifth part he starts personalizing it. There's a section where his grandparents' parents are talking on a house porch, and playing. It starts by being a very generic, yet

obviously very powerful, account of the middle passage and the slave trade in West Africa. I almost feel like by the end he felt comfortable enough in doing this sort of work to start to personalize it. Were there any particular artists or works you looked toward as a model, or precedent, for this sort of narrative through sound?

MR: Not particularly musicians. Lots of filmmakers, and weird correlations like Lars Von Trier's cycle of film. I've been influenced by people who have taken the idea of creating serial work, very personal serial work, very seriously. But not necessarily musicians so much.

EL: What about in terms of the non-standard notations that you employ in composition? Obviously, you are closely associated with the AACM. Elders like Braxton, and Wadada, and Roscoe have long championed non-standard notations as ways of expressing what they are doing.

MR: It's so strange. There must be something in the Chicago water because I've come into contact with all of those elders in one way or another, but I've ended up not coming into contact with their music as much.

EL: The actual physical music.

MR: I've come into contact with their music growing up, hearing it played in my house. I did play in a couple different Braxton ensembles. But that was very note heavy music.

EL: Traditional notation?

MR: Yes.

EL: I'm curious. Was there some time in your formal or informal musical education when someone said, "Here's a piece, but notice we can notate it in these other ways," or did you start yourself using symbols, using glyphs, coming up with game systems?

MR: The first person, one of the first people, who helped it really click for me, that I actually have the freedom to do whatever it is that I want to do...the AACM very much has this tradition of "You do what you want to do, and don't care about what other people think later. You just do what you want to do, whatever the music is telling you to do."...but I came into contact with Joe Maneri. It wasn't so much about talking about microtones. I remember one day him walking up to the board and drawing, he said, what was "his very own clef." And I remember just going "Your what? Your very own clef?" Inside I was going, "You can't do that." But of course you can. And being reminded of that. And also an inner fight of dealing with...I've come through institutions, learning to play music traditionally, and was constantly told that I couldn't do certain things, or that compositionally I had to be able to do things in this traditional manner in order to communicate sound. That completely went against, also, just dealing with punk rock traditions of--which I've been heavily affected by--of "No. If you want to make music you can make music. You just have to figure out a different way of

communicating.” So all of those things combined. It’s just really a hodgepodge of experience. Oh, and I also remember reading about some woman who had written a musical with no musical knowledge whatsoever. She just decided to come up with her own system, and it took me back to days I had as a child where I started writing music, maybe when I was about eight, but I didn’t know how and I came up with my own system of dots and slashes and things. I had forgotten about all that. Just so that I could have a way to organize these songs I was coming up with in my head. So all these things combined.

EL: I know you have one compositional technique which tends to bridge certain sections related to dream imagery...

MR: Yes.

EL: ..and has certain symbols involved there. Which reminded me the first time I saw them of a sort of Jungian analogy of dreams. Are there any literary influences or philosophical systems, or am I reading too much into that?

MR: No, everything I’m doing compositionally is some sort of excavation of my psychology, and I still don’t know what that is going to mean. I don’t know if that’s a good direction in which to go. The dream analysis work is a lot--again, I keep going back to these very personal things--is a lot about my own personal dream journals and my desire to lucid dream, for the sake of trying to figure out a way to create a life for myself where I can actually survive making this art. If you can dream yourself through it, if you can see yourself through it, if you can create this imagery then you can make these things happen. As far as the intellectual model, for me it moves at an incredibly tiny pace, depending on the direction in which I’m headed.

EL: I’m curious to the degree that you conceive of the whole project as, among other things, an attempt at having to learn and reveal things about yourself through the work. I’m curious to think that it’s through other musicians realizing this piece that you come to learn something about yourself. Is there a certain theory of improvisation behind that? Other people helping you discover things about yourself?

MR: I definitely have learned some new things, and I’ve been able to tap into a well of creativity that I wasn’t sure I had. So doing this work has given me affirmation. But I guess this goes back to bloodline family, that I cannot completely escape, as much as I might talk about trying to do that. There is this distinct line of service in my family. There are a lot of teachers, a lot of educators, a lot of community workers, social workers, medical people, all of these people who felt very strongly about sharing in the community. Being a musician didn’t really step up to the standard of what I was expected to do, in some ways. So the act of learning through sharing--I see this as community work with others, when I do it with other improvisers in different places--it’s a way of continuing this idea of service.

EL: What’s in the future for *Coin Coin*?

MR: What's in the future for *Coin Coin*? What's in the future for *Coin Coin*? Records. I'm very excited. I owe a lot to the Canadians, Canada. I owe much to so many people outside of my own country. The British put out my last record. The Canadians are going to put out the next set of some of my next records. *Coin Coin* is coming out on Constellation, Montreal's very own Constellation [Records], at least two segments of *Coin Coin*. So I'll be doing that. I'm developing more sound installation-type work of the pieces, doing more excavation, more interviewing, a lot of traveling in store for research. And developing more of the performative aspects for myself, as more of a performance artist. That is happening with the work. I thought I'd be done with it by now, actually.

EL: Is there an end? Is there a certain number of episodes, and then it's done?

MR: Yes. Yes. It was technically ten chapters. I call them chapters. They were ten stories. I've now bookended them with two solo narratives, so that's twelve segments total, and I have them all mapped out. But I've only gotten up to five, part of six. But I haven't been able to create enough funding to bring in the other musicians that I would like to do the larger ensemble pieces. I've been doing smaller solo sound installation segments. So it just keeps branching off into this whole other world.

EL: I hope we have the opportunity here, in Canada, to see more, and we certainly hope you have the opportunity and the resources are made available to realize them the way you think they should be realized.

MR: Absolutely. Absolutely. I'm very happy with where it's headed and where it's going. Canada will always be a part of it.