



# RUSS GERSHON

ENLARGING THE JAZZ UNIVERSE

BY JEFF CEBULSKI

In December of 1985, large ensemble jazz was in a moment of creative stasis when the Boston-area-based Either/Orchestra (E/O) performed its first concert at the Cambridge Public Library. Saxophonist and visionary Russ Gershon had assembled an assortment of local musicians, creating a “little big band” with three saxophones, two trumpets, two trombones plus rhythm section. His intention was to synthesize group teamwork and individual self-expression, while advancing an ahead-of-its-time vision for eclectic jazz compositions and interpretations of rock and pop tunes.

Beginning in 1988, the band went on extended road trips when such an idea seemed insane, especially because what audience existed for the music was unclear. But the tours, coupled with Gershon’s ability to market the orchestra through radio by creating his own label, Accurate Records, slowly crept the E/O into the nation’s jazz consciousness. Between 1987-2010, the orchestra released 11 albums (ten on Accurate) and has provided a career launching pad for a cadre of musicians, including John Medeski. The pianist-organist-keyboardist said that Gershon “showed me a way not to lose touch with the world, the belief there are people who would come [to hear the music]...I loved the vibe of the E/O, the musical freedom, the camaraderie. Any great bandleader has the ability to utilize what you have. Russ’ fearlessness is one of his biggest attributes. It’s almost subversive.” Another early E/O member, trombonist Curtis Hasselbring, said, “The workshop environment that Russ fostered meant that the band would be part of the process of making a composition come alive—a group effort.”

Longtime E/O saxophonist Charlie Kohlase remembered that before trips “I would make cassettes, and we’d have listening sessions of Steve Lacy, Roscoe Mitchell, Sonny Simmons, Sun Ra, John Tchicai, or whomever.” Such non-mainstream sounds became part of the band’s DNA. Other celebrated E/O alumni include trumpeters Dave Ballou and Tom Halter (the longest tenured alum next to Gershon), saxophonists-

bass clarinetists Andrew D’Angelo, Oscar Noriega and Douglas Yates, alto saxophonists Jaleel Shaw and Jeremy Udden and drummer Matt Wilson.

Gershon, a self-defined “mixed musical bag,” grew up near NYC, having “segued out of rock through Stevie Wonder’s ’70s albums and Herbie Hancock’s funk albums.” By the time he was 16, he says, “I had heard Alice Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Sam Rivers, you name it, in person.” At 17, he took up the saxophone and then turned back to rock via the punk generation: “Part of the punk aesthetic was that you didn’t need to have a lot of skill to play.” In the mid ’80s, he attended Berklee for a few semesters, and then founded the E/O as a rehearsal band, “to keep working on my composing and chart writing. But one thing led to another, and we wound up with gigs, albums and were on the road.” He admits, “It’s not just about scratching your own itch; you also want to bring audiences along with you.” For his part, Gershon, now 66, maintains his musical curiosity, finding ways to implement his discoveries into a broad range of compositions and arrangements. Trombonist Josh Roseman, an original E/O member, states, “Russ is a real sound activist, grounding himself in the history of the music, its community and in the potential of sound.” Gershon explains: “I love the whole tradition, but to me jazz is something that expands, so I put together this band to keep enlarging the jazz universe, a kind of counter-programming to the prevailing currents [of the ’80s].”

Over the years, Gershon developed a love of African music, and an introduction to Ethiopian music through a CD, *Ethiopian Groove: the Golden Seventies* (Blue-Silver, 1994; later reissued as a volume in Buda Musique’s celebrated *Éthiopiennes* series), led to a long involvement with it that will manifest itself this month as *Either/Orchestra Plays Éthiopiennes* (at the Brooklyn Bowl as part of NYC’s Winter Jazzfest). “Vintage Ethiopian music has a lot of horns and funky, weird versions of American styles and very strange pentatonic scales,” he says, “which appeals to my jazz brain that loves dissonance and weird harmonies...I had to turn the vocal lines into horn lines, what jazz musicians have been doing forever with standard tunes from America, right?” The E/O began to incorporate their take on the music into concerts, to positive audience responses. Later, Gershon received an email from Francis Falceto, a French musicologist and producer responsible for the *Ethiopian Groove* album. “He said, ‘This is great. Come to France and I’ll teach you all about this’...So, I was one of the first people to take the bait.” Falceto invited Gershon and the

E/O to play at a 2004 festival in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The concert was well-received and was recorded and released as *Live in Addis* in Falceto’s *Éthiopiennes* series on Buda Musique. “We’re the only American band [in the series], and that led to collaborating with old-time musicians whose songs we’d been listening to, a full circle kind of thing.” In Brooklyn, the group will be augmented by Munit Mesfin, an Ethiopian-American female singer Goshen heard in Ethiopia in 2011.

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted E/O activity and forced Gershon to be professionally creative, finding radio work and teaching music history before landing a fortuitous elementary school gig. “My late-life career addition is teaching general music to kindergarten through fourth grade students,” he says. “It’s really fun because I teach them pop songs from the ’30s, ’40s, ’50s up through the ’70s, even beyond. We go around the world and look at music from different countries and eras.” The E/O, meanwhile, has resumed with a revised membership, retaining Gershon, Kohlase and longtime bassist Rick McLaughlin. The ensemble will travel around the Eastern US this year, including Big Ears in Knoxville, TN. The soon-to-be released E/O album *Nalbandian L’Ethiopien (The Ethiopian)* (Buda Musique) includes seldom-heard music by Ethio-Armenian pioneer Nerses Nalbandian. Various live recordings with alumni and Ethiopian collaborators, along with a new recording of Gershon’s extended composition “The Collected Unconscious” are additionally in the can. Says Gershon, “We have so much music we could never write another tune, and we could play concerts for years and never have to repeat material. But now that we’re playing again, I want something new, you know?”

For more info visit [either-orchestra.org](http://either-orchestra.org). Gershon and the Either/Orchestra are at Brooklyn Bowl Jan. 10 (part of Winter Jazzfest). See Calendar.

## Recommended Listening:

- Either/Orchestra — *Across the Ominverse* (Accurate, 1986-95)
- Either/Orchestra — *Radium* (Accurate, 1988)
- Either/Orchestra — *The Calculus of Pleasure* (Accurate, 1990)
- Either/Orchestra — *More Beautiful Than Death* (Accurate, 1998-99)
- Either/Orchestra — *Éthiopiennes 20: Live in Addis* (Buda Musique, 2004)
- Either/Orchestra — *Éthiopiennes 32: Nalbandian L’Ethiopien (The Ethiopian)* (Buda Musique, 2011)

## LEST WE FORGET



# FRANKIE NEWTON

TRUMPETING THE UNHERALDED

BY KEN WAXMAN

Prominent during and just after the Swing era, trumpeter Frankie Newton (1906-1954), whose 120th birthday would have been January 4, but who lived less than half those years, is mostly a footnote in jazz history. Yet, in his day, his muted and thoughtful style was ranked highly, alongside such trumpeters as Charlie Shavers, Buck Clayton and Roy Eldridge. Featured on more than 100 records, he worked with leaders as diverse as Art Tatum, James P. Johnson, Mezz Mezzrow and John Kirby. He played on Bessie Smith’s final recording session, plus the original recordings of Maxine Sullivan’s “Loch Lomond” and Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit”.

So what’s responsible for Newton’s obscurity? For a start, while warm with a generous personality, he had a strong sense of social justice and would express it publicly, something Black musicians of that era were loath to do. As the late impresario George Wein, who booked him in Boston clubs once stated, “Newton would burn bridges while he was still crossing them.” This assertive political bent was part of Newton’s well-known identity as an active Communist. A believer in co-op bands, he complained about musicians’ poor working conditions and that players didn’t share in records’ profits. Party membership wasn’t illegal at that time and Newton was openly promoted playing at Communist Party-affiliated events from 1939-48. He was investigated by the FBI, but escaped any consequences of his party-membership. And by the end of his life, Newton seemed to be as interested in painting, working as a counselor at an integrated summer camp and writing regularly for the Communist *Daily Worker* newspaper, as much as his music.

“Musicians generally admired Newton and spoke of him with reverence,” states Matthew “Fat Cat” Rivera, host of WKCR-FM’s “Hot Club of New York”

radio program (he also runs and hosts the Flatiron District venue/music appreciation group of the same name). Rivera happens to be writing a biography on the trumpeter. “Newton’s behavior didn’t handicap him,” he adds. “But he was exploited, hurt, misunderstood, muted, ignored and didn’t get the breaks he deserved.” This dynamic may have started soon after his 1906 birth in poverty as William Frank Newton in Blacksburg, VA. Orphaned at an early age, he learned to play the trumpet, and after working in territory bands, relocated to New York in the ’20s with Lloyd Scott’s group. For the next few years he moved among bands led by Chick Webb, Teddy Hill and others. His big break should have happened shortly after arriving in NYC as part of what became bassist John Kirby’s commercially successful sextet. Unfortunately, “Newton soon left after a stormy fallout with Kirby,” notes Rivera. Still he led regular groups at New York’s Café Society, where he became friendly with figures such as Canada Lee and fellow Communist Paul Robeson. But he quit that gig too in the ’40s, complaining about its working conditions.

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about jazz, and all about the drums. I got to meet a lot of musicians. I got to meet a lot of African American musicians, and they shared with me what was going on. I started to find out about the “other America” at a young age.

**NYCJR:** How did you make the transition from sort of the more straight-ahead, post-bop jazz into the jazz-funk stylings of Headhunters?

**CLARK:** It was easy. In high school I was trying to be like Max Roach, Roy Haynes and Philly Joe Jones. But the girls I was dating liked James Brown. It sounded kind of like jazz to me, but I can play the beats right away. My jazz chops were right there, so I didn’t have to even woodshed these beats. I could hear them and play them. I already liked that tight Roy Haynes snare sound, so I had the pop when I played the backbeat. From traveling around with my dad, I knew about the shuffle and the blues. They had a huge effect on me. I was a natural for this type of thing. I could play the funk straight off. [Bassist] Paul Jackson was my best friend, and he introduced me to Herbie. When I auditioned with Herbie, I tried to play kind of like Elvin [Jones] and Tony [Williams]. I wanted him to know that I could do it, and Herbie says, “We’re not doing that. We’re not doing that, man.” I wanted to show Herbie I could play jazz. I didn’t care about playing funk with him. But then Herbie said, “Play that wild funk Paul tells me about.” And I did, and Herbie hired me right then.

**NYCJR:** You’ve made it a point to distinguish jazz from other genres that may seem somewhat jazz-adjacent, like blues, funk or soul. When you were with Headhunters, did you see yourself within the jazz idiom?

**CLARK:** Paul and I played jazz together. We weren’t trying to play funk. But Herbie was trying to play funky music. So I would use all kinds of jazz language to fashion a beat together. The marketing people now call it “jazz-funk,” but I wasn’t thinking of it. And when playing with Herbie, there was no time to think. He just takes off.

**NYCJR:** How did you make the transition from Headhunters back to more straight-ahead jazz?

**CLARK:** I was losing my mind not playing jazz. I’d come home from a Headhunters tour, and I would just play, like, a little trio in some little joint for \$100, and I would be in heaven. My wife was like, “Look how happy you are.” So I started interjecting myself back into the world as a jazz artist.

**NYCJR:** You still play with The Headhunters [post-Hancock, the group added a “The” prefix], and you still continue to record and tour with original Headhunters percussionist Bill Summers. What is your continuing relationship like with The Headhunters and Summers?

**CLARK:** I love Bill. Bill Summers is one of my closest friends. We’ve just celebrated our 52nd anniversary of playing together. When we play together, we’re like one guy. We read each other, we don’t even have to speak about it. It’s great. And regarding Headhunters—it’s part of the reason I’m a known drummer. I don’t want to completely turn my back on that. The Headhunters is a real high-level experience.

**NYCJR:** You’ve had a lot of recent success in jazz, including ongoing collaborations with pianist Michael Wolff and others. How do these projects fit within your post-Headhunters career?

**CLARK:** Michael and I have been playing on and off for years. When I moved to New York, Michael and I put a band together and we played a million \$100 New York jazz gigs, which was great training. And we hung out all the time, and we wrote music, and tried stuff. We played weird and we played real straight. Michael could play the blues, so I like him. We put together the Wolff & Clark Expedition, made some records and did some gigs. We’ve been doing that on and off. He and I have never stopped playing together. I’m just trying to keep all the balls in the air. I’m not a political guy, so it’s got to be the music.

**NYCJR:** I would be remiss if I didn’t ask about Vince Guaraldi and *Peanuts*.

**CLARK:** I feel great about it. Vince Guaraldi was a dear friend. He was a crazy cat. He had a bad temper, but he was a good dude. And his real thing was, he was like a Wynton Kelly swinger. He could swing and bring the blues really out of pocket. I didn’t even know about the *Peanuts* thing when I was playing with it. This is weird. I was just working, I was a young guy. We just played tunes. We played snippets. He didn’t tell us what it was for or anything. Eventually we found out it was for Charlie Brown!

*For more info visit [mikeclarkdrums.com](http://mikeclarkdrums.com). The Mike Clark Quintet will be at Smalls Jan. 16-17. See Calendar.*

**Recommended Listening:**

- Herbie Hancock—*Thrust* (Columbia, 1974)
- The Headhunters—*Survival of the Fittest* (Arista, 1975)
- Jack Walrath—*Revenge of the Fat People* (Stash, 1981)
- Mike Clark & Paul Jackson—*The Funk Stops Here* (Tiptoe-Enja, 1991)
- Mike Clark—*Blueprints of Jazz Vol. 1* (Talking House, 2006)
- Mike Clark—*Itai Doshin* (Wide Hive, 2024)

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While as Rivera says “Newton was extremely personally sociable, constantly hosting people at his apartment, giving children free music lessons, and buying rounds of drinks for everyone at any bar he walked into,” that didn’t stop him from publicly stating his opinions. He also never compromised when it came to race relations. There are stories of him confronting noisy patrons. The late jazz writer, critic and historian, Nat Hentoff, recalled a Boston incident when after paying back a debt to a photographer, the photog used a common expression of the day, commenting, “That’s mighty white of you.” Newton replied: “No, that’s mighty Black of me.” Newton was often in Boston during that time since his fellow Communist girlfriend, and later wife, lived in the city.

It was during the ’30s and ’40s that Newton recorded most often. A few sessions were under his name; on some he backed singers (Holiday, Stella Brooks); others were led by established swing stars such as Buster Bailey or Pete Brown; plus he was on the famous Port of Harlem Jazzmen 1939 sessions with Sidney Bechet, Big Sid Catlett, Albert Ammons and others. By the late ’40s, his musical gigs became more sporadic and his last known recording was in 1951. Having relocated back to New York, physical ailments such as a recurring back problem and an earlier botched tonsillectomy added to his worries.

In 1948, a fire destroyed his apartment, clothes and instruments. Benefits organized in his name eventually allowed him to buy another trumpet, but by that time Newton had become an alcoholic. He died of acute gastritis at the age of 48 in 1954. Trumpeter-cornetist Ruby Braff was one of the few players who cited him as an influence. Yet, there is a puzzle: as a self-described

progressive, why didn’t Newton try to play the progressive jazz of the day, such as bop? The answer may be in Rivera’s assessment: “In the 1940s, jazz compartmentalized into bebop, traditional and rhythm and blues.” Ever the individualist, instead, according to Rivera, “Frankie Newton created a concept and worked to perfect it.”

*For more info visit [hotclubnny.org](http://hotclubnny.org)*

**Recommended Listening:**

- Frankie Newton—*The Frankie Newton Collection 1929-1946* (Acrobat Music, 1929-46)
- Frankie Newton—*At The Onyx Club* (Tax, 1937)
- Teddy Hill—*And His NBC Orchestra* (RCA Bluebird, 1937)
- Frankie Newton—*The Chronological: 1937-1939* (Classics, 1937-39)
- The Port of Harlem Jazzmen—*The Complete Recordings* (Mosaic, 1939)
- James P. Johnson’s New York Orchestra—*New York Jazz* (Asch, 1944)

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tragically died in a car crash in 1985), all of which had an effect on him. “I would say without D. Boon and the Minutemen, this label wouldn’t exist—just like D. Boon was the spirit of the Minutemen, I feel like the Minutemen are the spirit of the label.”

Fittingly, Mike Watt, the legendary bassist of the Minutemen and pride of San Pedro, CA, has made his way on to Otherly Love as part of Three-Layer Cake, a collaborative trio featuring New York’s very own: drummer Mike Pride and guitarist-banjoist Brandon Seabrook. Released last year and recorded fully remotely without anyone being in the same room together, *Sounds the Color of Grounds* fused the ethos of punk and wild funk rhythms with salvos of spoken-word (or as Watt calls it, “spiel”). Aside from the recording being a singularly trippy listen, at the heart of it is the crucial element that is Buono and his label’s *raison d’etre*: forging community. “Mike Pride and Brandon Seabrook, they were guests on my *The Watt From Pedro Show* [Watt’s long-running podcast wherein he interviews musicians],” Watt explains about how he met his Three-Layer Cake bandmates, who were suggested by Buono to appear on his show. “Collaboratin’ with people. Art being a fabric that can connec’ [the unique Watt-speak for ‘connection’] humans in a non-fascist way. You can collab’ and then just not talk about it, do somethin’ about it.” Watt continues. “It’s like the old days, where this guy meets this guy who knows this guy. You get a connec’ and music is the common thread. That’s how Stevie Buono is!”

Chad Taylor wholeheartedly agrees with Watt’s assessments on the concept of connection with Otherly Love. “What I love about Stephen is that he is a connector in the truest sense. I’ve worked with many people in the music industry who attempt to connect people but Stephen goes above and beyond. What sets Stephen apart is that not only does he know many musicians but he also has a deep understanding behind their music, their aesthetics, concepts and motivations.”

*For more info visit [otherlylove.net](http://otherlylove.net). Otherly Love artists performing this month include Brandon Seabrook at The Jazz Gallery Jan. 9 (part of Pyroclastic’s “A Winter Festival”), Close Up Jan. 15 (as leader) and Jan. 25 (with Nick Dunston). Mike Pride is at Roulette Jan. 24 (part of “Improv Nights 2026: A Tribute to Derek Bailey”). Ches Smith is at The Stone at The New School Jan. 7-10 and 14-17, Solar Myth (Philadelphia, PA) Jan. 13, The Jazz Gallery Jan. 23 (with Anna Webber) and Bar Bayeux Jan. 31 (with Stephan Crump). Marshall Allen and Chad Taylor are at Solar Myth (Philadelphia, PA) Jan. 3. See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.*