



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. 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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