



MIKE CLARK

SWINGING HEADHUNTER

BY ANDREW SCHINDER

While it may seem like a fairly obvious statement that Mike Clark is a jazz musician, it's not as simple a notion as it may appear given the drummer's long, multi-faceted, layered career. Clark, who becomes an octogenarian later this year, is most famous for his work in Herbie Hancock's iconic jazz-funk ensemble Headhunters, beginning with the band's mid-'70s heyday (it was Clark who created the legendary, complex beats on the group's seminal "Actual Proof"). But his true passion is swinging. While still keeping the funky torch of the Headhunters alive, he has created some of this century's best straight-ahead jazz, including his most recent album, 2025's *Itai Doshin* (his second for the Wide Hive label), which includes veteran trumpeter Eddie Henderson, his longtime colleague dating back to his pre-Headhunter days of the '60s.

NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD: Let's start with the new album and tour. How has it been going and how do you feel people are responding to it?

MIKE CLARK: Great. We're climbing up on the charts! The reviews have been great, the band is killing. We played the other night at The Side Door in Old Lyme, CT, and sold out all the shows. The band was on fire. I'm a drummer, but I'm not a laid-back drummer. I'm a "fire" drummer; not as fiery as some, maybe, but I'm certainly not a one-handed drummer. It's a really good band and we just did a new record while we were out at SF Jazz (in San Francisco). It will be coming out in May. There are some nice surprises on the next album. So I'm busy.

NYCJR: You always assemble incredible bands with musicians of equal caliber. What is the interplay like between you and your bandmates during these recording sessions? How much of the output is a result of collaboration versus your own vision?

CLARK: Well, because I'm the leader, I pick the material, and suggest, musically, from the drum set, the direction. But I don't verbally tell anybody what to do. I pick people who are all bandleaders in their own right. I mean, on last year's *Itai Doshin*, pianist Patrice Rushen is fantastic, and Eddie Henderson, forget it. I've been playing with Eddie since I was 18 years old: he's my dear friend. They know me: they know my idiosyncrasies, as well as my good stuff. Everybody knows what everybody's saying, because we've all studied this music all our lives. That said, it's always a surprise. I don't know what Patrice is going to play, and even though I play a lot with saxophonist Craig Handy, I have no idea what he's going to do. I supply the charts and we just play. I very seldom say anything to these guys, because I don't really have to.

NYCJR: The term "itai doshin" translates to "many in body, one in mind." I can't think of a phrase that better reflects the process of creating jazz music. What does the phrase mean to you, especially in how it informed the creation of the new album?

CLARK: I learned the phrase from Herbie Hancock when I was in his band. It's a Buddhist term, and we all practiced Buddhism with the Headhunters at one point. I still do. "Many in body, one in mind" doesn't necessarily mean we all think alike. Roughly it translates to "cooperation." We have a goal here. Let's say we're going to make a record. We all want to make a good record. We all want to communicate and play together, but we are all individuals.

NYCJR: You go far back with Eddie Henderson. In addition to you having appeared on his *Heritage* (Blue Note, 1976)—which Rushen was also on—he and veteran bassist Henry Franklin are on your last two albums for Wide Hive. *Itai Doshin* seems a little more "straight-ahead," whereas *Kosen Rufu* (2023) might be a little more experimental, certainly with time changes.

CLARK: I flirt with the avant garde. I don't really record it that much. And on *Kosen Rufu*, I handpicked that band because I knew I could have that vibe present. My life was in a different place. I wanted to play more open, more free. And when I do stuff like that, then I always want to get back to the blues and swinging. Those are my roots. Funk is not my roots. Many people think it is because of Herbie, but swing is.

NYCJR: You and Henderson both have history with Hancock. How is that shared experience reflected in how you play together now?

CLARK: First of all, Eddie and I played a million jazz gigs way back in San Francisco with Joe Henderson. Years' worth of jazz gigs. I didn't get to play jazz with Herbie, and Eddie did, but the stuff I did get to play with Herbie, when Herbie was soloing, he could change the molecules in the room. Herbie would get the spirits so high you'd think you were seeing things. And Eddie and I have that conversation: that's the only guy we all know you could do that with—Herbie would take you there. So Eddie and I both know that zone. I'm not Herbie Hancock, but when Eddie and I play together, we're searching for something like that. And I can feel when he is, and he can feel when I am, and we're trying to get that energy. Herbie had that brilliance when he would play, where he's tracking every note everybody's playing, he's reacting to it, so it's like you're on a really high-level basketball team. You're going down court full blast, and somebody might throw you the ball at any second and you've got to make it. Herbie used to say, you have to listen to everything! Not just yourself, not just the soloist. Even the people yelling in the room, it's all part of it. Eddie can play like that with you, where it's a collage of humanity.

NYCJR: Your father was a railroad worker and you grew up accompanying him on the rails, seeing America. How did these formative experiences help educate you on music and how you applied it to your playing?

CLARK: My dad was a jazz drummer, but he quit when he was 20, because he wasn't really that good, but he loved the music, and he had a great record collection. So before I could walk, my brain had all of it internalized. My father thought I was a good drummer at four, five years old. And he would take me to the nightclubs, and buy the drummer a drink, or the band leader, or give somebody five bucks. And he would say, "Let my boy play." I would play and sit in, and I would learn tunes that way, and drummers would talk to me—do this, don't do that. I traveled with him, and every city he would take me to a different jazz club. It was all

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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. 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 hotclubny.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'être*: 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. 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.