



MYSTERY SCHOOL JAMES NEWTON

INTERVIEWED BY
AARON COHEN

Newton's visit included sitting in with Edward Wilkerson's Shadow Vignettes Orchestra, a duet concert with multiple woodwind instrumentalist Douglas Ewart, and instructing a master class at the Sherwood Music Academy. A few months earlier, he was in town as a member of Jon Jang's Pan Asian Arkestra. That Newton travelled to the mid-West from his California home to appear as a sideman and to teach — instead of leading his own group on a tour — says a great deal about his humility.

During the interview, it becomes clear where his lack of self-importance emanates. Deeply religious, he fondly recalled how his family's church attendance in the rural South created a permanent musical and spiritual impression.

"My first memories were of female voices singing alone in a small church," Newton said. "And I remember chills going up and down my spine

from the music — I was about four or five. All the times since then that I've been making music, I've been chasing that feeling. And maybe this year [1994], I understand that feeling better than I ever have up to this point in time, because maybe spirituality and one's relationship to God means a lot more to me now than it did in the past. I'm understanding that I have to make that emphasis that much greater to be more alive, and for the work that I want to do for the rest of my life."

Other early musical influences included his father's Duke Ellington record collection, and blues players Bobby "Blue" Bland, Big Joe Turner, and Jimmy Smith. Meanwhile, Newton's mother was almost strictly a devotee of spiritual and gospel vocalists the Fairfield Four and Sam Cooke. "It really killed her when he left the Soul Stirrers and went pop," Newton says, "but she loved his singing so much she went with it."

Despite the identification of Newton with the flute, it was not his first — or even second — instrument. He tried the trombone at nine ("probably a constant horror show for my parents, I gave it up after six months") and later tried the guitar (Newton always greatly admired Jimi Hendrix), bass, electric bass, alto saxophone, soprano saxophone, and clarinet. After being struck when hearing the flute accompany the tragic moments of a high school production of *Death of a Salesman*, Newton began playing by ear before studying more academically.

"I feel that jazz composition at this point is in a very fruitful and amazing phase," said flutist/composer/freelance arts ambassador James Newton when he began an autumn lecture at the Chicago Cultural Center. Over the course of the next hour, he insightfully discussed the historical progression of African drumming into American gospel and jazz; touched on the enduring innovations of Duke Ellington and Miles Davis; remarked on the modern methods of transposing manuscripts on a computer; and discussed the question of boundaries between notated composition and improvisation. The range of the topics Newton covered was exhaustive, but his articulation throughout was as smoothly logical as his musical ideas have been over the course of his career.

Although he scorns polls and other ranking systems, he is clearly the pre-eminent player on his instrument in jazz today. Using a unique combination of overtones, finger manipulations, and playing while singing, he has created an energetic exploration of pitch that hasn't been heard in almost thirty years. His own compositions range from free-reaching open improvisations to tightly-knit suites. For Newton, inspiration stems from all over, including the musicians he met on a recent trip to South Africa and his own computer experiments. On his *Suite For Frida Kahlo* (1994, Audioquest), Latin American influences are added to the palate. But this disc's release was not his reason for the tour that brought him to Chicago

"I entered junior college when I was eighteen, and basically I couldn't read anything faster than a quarter note," Newton says. "I remember my first flute teacher telling me I would never make it."

While working as a counsellor at a YMCA summer camp just prior to college, Newton was introduced to Eric Dolphy's playing through Charles Mingus' records.

"Mingus was my gateway to the whole tradition of the music," Newton said. "I was reading that Eric was influenced by Art Tatum. Believe it or not, a lot of the faster things I played on the flute were very much influenced by Tatum. I used to try to take certain things that Tatum did with his right hand and try to transform them to the flute. And I still think Eric's playing on *You Don't Know What Love Is* is my favourite piece of music on the instrument. It was like a blueprint for the future because it had all the glissandos, multiphonics, and all these quote-unquote 'modern' techniques, and a really incredible lyricism. He used to say that when he heard a chord, sometimes he heard all 12 notes, and I really understood that."



Roland Kirk also influenced Newton at this time.

"I love Roland Kirk because there were a lot of things in his playing that remind me of my experience in the Black church in the energy that he puts into the music," Newton said. "His inflections that were strongly blues-related sometimes relate to spirituals, which he also recorded. And something spiritual happens in his playing that is so strong that you get transported. And that takes the artist to give a whole lot."

When Newton began performing in a regular jazz group, he learned why, and taught himself how, he had to emulate such force.

"I started singing into the flute to give the flute more power," Newton said. "I remember when I was playing with David Murray, Stanley Crouch, and Bobby Bradford, Stanley would never let me use a microphone. This really forced me to make my sound project. Arthur and David had so much warmth and passion and fire, then I'd come up and sound — as Frank Russell would say — like a fart in a windstorm. And to get the feeling I wanted, I had to give when I play. Some people choose to play reserved, and I guess that's their choice, but I choose not to play reserved. I'd rather give when I play, and when I get done people have the feeling that I gave everything that I have to give."

Released when he was twenty-five, Newton's seminal *Paseo del Mar* (1978, India Navigation) album shows the directions he would explore throughout his career. His virtuosity is punctuated with an uncanny ability to create flurries of complex harmonic passages through the flute's seemingly narrow tube. Newton's original compositions reflect a marked Ellington influence, and the presence of a cellist in the quartet is one of the many unconventional instrumentalists that he would eventually employ. Two years after *Paseo del Mar*, Newton put together a strikingly innovative wind ensemble featuring tuba, bassoon, oboe, English horn, and the great John Carter's clarinet for *The Mystery School* (1980, India Navigation). The counterbalance of these instruments' tonalities and his own solo flights on the extended *The Wake* are especially beautiful. On his album of Ellington/Strayhorn compositions, *The African Flower* (1985, Blue Note), Newton re-examined the role of improvisation within composition.

"The more I studied Ellington, the more I realized it's good to have players improvising in certain rhythm sections," Newton said. "It gives a whole other feeling to the piece. That's something I used a lot from *African Flower* on. Being a lot less strict — but I was never really super-strict, and learning that what's on the page should really be malleable to get at what the music is really trying to say."

"What I thought about [regarding Ellington] is what made the music unique — beyond Ellington's genius — was his way of looking at individuals and what they had to offer," Newton said. "And as far as an orchestrator, no one can compare to Ellington. I've always seen a strong parallel between colour

and emotion, and orchestration is colour and emotion. Most of my thinking is along the lines of the individualities of the players and how I can balance certain colours and put them together to get textures to where the emotion and feeling of the music really jumps out at you. It's like creating an atmosphere. The arrangements were like when a great painter takes a canvas and puts all the different colours together for the background and the fine details are provided by each individual artist who participated. I just gave the background for them to do their thing."

As a player, Newton is also conscious of how his use of multiphonics continues to evolve.

"It seems like each year it [multiphonics] gets more refined and broader and there's more I can do with it now," Newton said. "A lot of it comes from fingerings on the flute, singing, and then when those two are happening simultaneously. And with the third event, back during the *Mystery School* days, there were things I could really control and things I was in the process of learning. Now I can control a lot of things. I've been experimenting with putting false fingerings and voice together to create this whole other set of combinations. But a lot of it has to do with the overtone series, and when you use false fingerings, the overtones become a lot more complex because the series isn't pure when it's cut up by those false fingerings. And then I'm using a lot different vowels to open and close the mouth — as a singer would. I think also emotionally I can do a lot more with it now."

A few months after the elections in South Africa brought the African National Congress into power, Newton visited the country along with Jon Jang.

"It was the most moving experience I've ever had in going to a place in all my years as a working musician," Newton said. "And it was a great honour because I was the first person in my mother's and father's family to go back home and honour the ancestors. Everyone kept saying 'welcome home,' and it really felt like home. We gave concerts in galleries, did workshops in the Black townships, and met just incredible young musicians. I feel that South African music is just unbelievably powerful. And I saw this real feeling of a circle. An offshoot of the Fisk Jubilee Singers introduced the African American choral tradition all over South Africa at the turn of the century. And it was embraced and they ran with it. Of course, the indigenous music was mixed with the choral tradition to create this hybrid. Jazz is really popular in the townships and South African music is really popular in the states. A lot is being fed back and forth."

Along with his absorption of South African music, Newton observed how much of an uphill battle will have to be fought to dismantle apartheid's legacy. He remains optimistic about that country's future.

"I feel the sense of community in South Africa has been partially lost over here. I felt so good to be able to be back in the kind of spirit of 'us' rather than 'I,' which is something that we really suffer from in America. I'd like to be able to teach in the townships in '96, and make more permanent connections there; I felt so much love for the people. There's a lot of pain and suffering, but I feel they have one of the greatest people of the Twentieth Century as their leader, and that says a lot. And I have to say that Winnie Mandela is deeply loved and respected across the country, particularly by the youth. Without her, none of it would have happened."

The importance of community activism helped spark the *Suite for Frida Kahlo* project. Newton has always been moved by the Mexican painter's work, as well as her political consciousness, and embrace of folk culture. In the late '80s and early '90s, wars between Black and Latino gangs claimed many lives in Los Angeles, and he felt it was important that "instead of doing [songs from the suite] in the quote-unquote 'artsy' institutions, we took them to the 'hood' to bridge growing gaps.

Continuing to create wonders with atypical jazz instruments, *Suite for Frida Kahlo*'s line-up features bassoons and Newton's long-time compadre, George Lewis.

"I've always loved two trombones. It just kills me when you hear them put together with a flute. The bones have such a great range and are so vocal because of the slides. I love the way the bassoon blends with the other instruments, and I've spent enough time playing classical chamber music to understand how effective it can be as a solo voice, or a voice blending with others. Putting it in that particular context, and then putting a bass clarinet and flute together is rough! Stravinsky knew about that. Then, there's the different players. What more can you say about George Lewis? It's like he re-invented the trombone. Pedro [Eustache] is just a great flute player who plays all the reeds really well. It's just the combination of the individuals and trying to reach for colours that you don't hear too often."

At the time we spoke, Newton put several ongoing projects on various burners. An album he co-led with David Murray in 1992 had been slated for imminent release by DIW. At the University of California-Irvine, he teaches courses in the work of Miles Davis, coaches an improvising ensemble, and teaches a graduate level compositional analysis course that focuses on Bartok, Ellington, Ravel, and Sibelius. Newton also began venturing into electronics through using the computer as a composing tool. His *Gumbo Ya Ya* score that was choreographed by Donald MacKayle and performed by the San Francisco Ballet features this new technology.

"The computer enabled me to think and create music in a very non-linear fashion, which was really liberating to me," Newton said. "And it was the first time in a long time that I could approach it in such a free manner that there weren't the cultural problems that usually exist. Like on one of the pieces, I had a dream that I was in Senegal and I heard a drum ensemble while I heard the string section of a symphony orchestra. And the string section was swinging — so you know it was a dream! But it was so clear that I started working on the piece, and it became the foundation for one of the movements of *Gumbo Ya Ya*. A lot of academic electronic music affected my head, but not my body and heart so much. And I wanted to create music that would be reflective of the African-American experience. So that's what I've been working on."

At the time of our conversation, Newton's disc of electronic-enhanced music, with the working title *Above Is Above All*, was slated for release on his own label. Newton has plans to turn this company into a "collective for artists to take control of certain projects that they do," similar to the goals of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians.

And he has not turned away from the instrument he revitalized.

"Solo recording is another thing that I want to do," Newton said. "I have a studio in my house now and the quality is so good that I can do a solo album there. Perhaps after the electronic album is completed, that might be my next project. I know that it's not quote-unquote 'in fashion' now, but so what? It seems like solo albums are book-ends for different points of my life. So I think I'm due for another book-end." □