

# J A M E S N E W T O N



PHOTOGRAPHY: GREG HEISLER / 1985

BLUE NOTE is a registered Trademark of Capitol Records, Inc.





## *James Newton*

---

Flutist James Newton, a highly-respected performer who feels at home in many areas of the world of jazz, has long been a devoted follower of the music of Duke Ellington, and that of the Duke's alter ego and collaborator, Billy Strayhorn. To pay homage to the two masters, Newton has recorded seven of their finest works for The African Flower (BT-85109), his October, 1985 debut LP for Blue Note Records.

The album spotlights several jazz artists of reknown, among them pianist Roland Hanna, alto saxophonist Arthur Blythe, cornetist Olu Dara, vibist Jay Hoggard, violinist John Blake and drummer Billy Hart.

"At age 19, when I became truly serious about music," the 32-year old leader says, "I began to realize that Ellington and Strayhorn were the pinnacle of the art form. I had grown up listening to the more popular Ellington works at home, but later Stanley Crouch (music critic for the Village Voice and annotator for The African Flower) introduced me to a lot of the early material, the suites. I was floored by the wealth of Duke's talent.

"So for a while, I bought nothing but Ellington albums. And through Duke, I became an ardent admirer of Strayhorn, who was Ellington's right-hand man and composing partner from the '40s until his death in 1967."

Newton has recorded Ellington and Strayhorn songs on previous albums, such as "Take The A Train" on From Inside (BvHaast) and "Day Dream" on James Newton (Gramavision), but not an LP with only their material. "So The African Flower is my chance to fulfill a dream I've had since 1977," he relates.

"As a bonus, due to the popularity of the composers, this will probably be my most accessible album, which makes the people at Blue Note very happy. And me, too, since I'm not making any sort of concessions in the music for commercial reasons."

The leader understood the necessity of putting his personal mark on this project. "I saw that if I were to tackle these great tunes, I'd have to have my own perspective to make the LP stand up. There's a lot of me in this music, and I feel that if people listen to my perception of Ellington and Strayhorn, maybe they'll have a better understanding of my own musical conception."

The flutist/composer chose tunes that span four decades to show the breadth of the Ellington and Strayhorn libraries, and "to let people know that these players, like Blythe, Dara and Blake, have a deep knowledge of earlier jazz." As did Ellington, Newton wrote his arrangements for these specific players, with their particular sound in mind.



"Black And Tan Fantasy", composed by Duke in 1925, has a lot of blues feeling without being a blues per se," Newton says. "I picked this one for Olu, who's one of the few people who understands the language of the plunger (where a wah-wah sound is achieved through use of special mutes). I feel Olu's solo is a classic." Here the flutist sings into his instrument while he solos, creating his own plunger-like effects.

"Virgin Jungle," a 1965 work, represents an extension of Ellington's use of Afro-Hispanic rhythms, says Newton. "Duke recorded different versions of this tune, and I combined parts of each in my arrangements. It's long, too, so it gives the players a chance to stretch out a little."

Baritone Milt Grayson, who was with Ellington in the '50s, sings the haunting "Strange Feeling," an Ellington/Strayhorn collaboration from the "Perfume Suite." "This piece, which is very expressionistic and which we do much slower than the recordings, has become a favorite of mine," Newton says. "And listen to Milt. Such resonance, such phrasing."

"Fleurette Africaine," or "The African Flower," is a true blues, written by Duke in 1963. This one features Newton and violinist John Blake.

The 1940 classic "Cottontail" is an up-tempo feature for Blythe's full-of-life alto sax. "I like pieces that challenge the players in different ways, and Blythe sailed on this one," the leader remarks. "This was fun to do. We just got the melody down and then off we went."

The album concludes with two ballads, "Sophisticated Lady," from 1933, played solo by Newton, and "Passion Flower," Strayhorn's 1941 opus, originally done by the magnificent Johnny Hodges and here handled with aplomb by Blythe and pianist Hanna. "Roland brought so much to this date," Newton says. "His knowledge of this music, his feeling, added immeasurably to my project."

Of the participants, Newton has the highest compliments. "They all played with incredible feeling, and were spontaneous when I needed spontaneity. The date was recorded in a day and a half, thanks to these musicians."

# # #

Newton was born in 1953 and raised in San Pedro, California, the port city just south of Los Angeles. In his early teens, influenced by the blues, gospel and jazz music he heard at home and in his environs, James began playing electric bass and saxophones. He was soon playing and singing in a band that offered cover versions of Jimi Hendrix songs, plus the top R&B tunes of the day. At 16, he started on flute and was introduced to the world of jazz through flutists like Eric Dolphy and Roland Kirk, and major composers such as Ellington and Charles Mingus.



Moving to Pomona, 30 miles east of downtown Los Angeles, for his last year of high school, Newton encountered Stanley Crouch, and joined the drummer-writer's group that featured such now-notable avant-garde musicians as saxophonists Blythe and David Murray, and cornetist Bobby Bradford. To complete his realm of influences, Newton studied the classics at California State University, Los Angeles, graduating with his music degree in 1977.

At Murray's urging, Newton moved to New York in 1978, where his duets with the tenor saxophonist drew critical acclaim. Jobs became more frequent, and Newton worked with Murray, Blythe, pianist Anthony Davis (with whom he recorded three LPs, including I've Known Rivers (Gramavision) and Crystal Texts (Moers Music) and Cecil Taylor's big band. He also began to record regularly as a leader and his albums include Paseo Del Mar and The Mystery School (both India Navigation), Axum (ECM) and James Newton and Luella (Gramavision).

In 1982, Newton moved back to San Pedro, where he lives today with his wife, Valerie, and their two children, James III, 8, and Jeannelle, 4. The relative isolation of this seaside community hasn't halted Newton's career in the slightest. He travels extensively, often to Europe, and when at home, teaches at the Wind College, an independent school he co-founded with Red Callendar, Bradford, John Carter and Charles Owens, and at California Institute of the Arts, just north of Los Angeles in Valencia, where he teaches composition.

1985 has been a very rewarding year for Newton. In February, he took part in the historic "One Night With Blue Note" concert in New York City's Town Hall, playing tunes that were originally recorded by his mentor, Eric Dolphy. Their performances are available on One Night With Blue Note Preserved, a deluxe four-record boxed set (Blue Note BTDK 85117). Later, he was commissioned to write a piece for Los Angeles' acclaimed New American Orchestra and in May, his "91st Psalm" for lyric soprano, piano solo and orchestra was performed in the prestigious Dorothy Chandler Pavillion of the Los Angeles Music Center. And in October, Newton's performances helped inaugurate the new five-stage complex of the Los Angeles Theatre Center.

Throughout his career, Newton has been honored not only with high critical regard but with prestigious awards as well. He's won the Down Beat International Critic's Poll as top flutist in the years 1982-1985, and he's won that distinguished journal's Reader's Poll in 1983 and 1984. His Luella album was given the 1984 Montreux Gran Prix du Disque and James Newton was voted one of the top LPs of 1983 by Newsweek and the Los Angeles Times.

With The African Flower, James Newton's fruitful career continues to blossom.

###

October, 1985