

Stretching The Flute's Boundaries

James Newton wants to give the flute a more vigorous presence in jazz. "It doesn't have the strength of a horn," he notes, acknowledging the instrument's low-profile role in the music. "The powerful and broad sounds of a trumpet or tenor sax can grip an audience immediately. A flute is a lot more subtle. However, if you look at important jazz flute players like Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Eric Dolphy, James Moody and Henry Threadgill, you notice that the instrument attracts artists who have very diverse perspectives on the music."

Newton's perspective is as broad as diverse as they come. A restless innovator on his instrument, Newton not only has three new CDs flooding the market within the span of a couple months, but he's just returned from a six-week trip to Europe where he was involved in five different musical endeavors: touring for two-and-a-half weeks with drummer Andrew Cyrille's trio; performing with reed player David Murray's Creole Project in Lyon, France; leading a week-long workshop with Niger flutist Yacouba Alzouma in Paris; conducting the Italian National Jazz Orchestra at the renowned Association of Siena Jazz in Toscana, Italy; and serving as composer-in-residence at the Societa Italiana Par Lo Studio Della Musica Afro Americana in Pescara, Italy, where an evening of his classical chamber music was showcased and he premiered a composition for solo flute.

"Yeah, I'm a little dizzy, but thrilled, too," says the 44-year-old, Southern California-based Newton. "Working in all these idioms brings out the different sides of my personality."

Though he slackened his musical pace a bit during the early '90s to devote more time

to family, Newton was hardly idle. He taught at the University of California, Irvine (where he's a tenured professor), performed and recorded with a number of artists, including Cyrille, Murray, Billy Hart and Jon Jang, and worked on several classical and jazz commissioned works. In addition, Newton's 1994 CD *Suite For Frida Kahlo* (AudioQuest) showcased his prowess as a virtuoso flutist, inspired composer and poignant socio-political commentator.

In leading the charge for acceptance of his instrument in the jazz world, Newton explores fresh multiphonics terrain by singing through the flute and integrates West African flute styles into the jazz tradition. In addition to playing with a pure lyricism, he also makes bold and even brash musical statements with piercing high-note trills and whirlwinds of improvisation.

The flute category champion in Down Beat's Critics Poll since 1982 and Readers Poll since 1983, Newton stretches the boundaries of the flute on three distinct new projects. Scheduled for release later this year is *Yellow River Blue* (Water Lily Acoustics), Newton's mesmerizing duet album with esteemed Chinese erhu player Chen Jie-Bing, whom he met while they were both performing in the Jon Jang Sextet. The CD showcases the pair performing a beautiful suite of folk songs from different regions of China, an improv-steeped Newton suite entitled "Falling Petals" and the swinging "Blues For Sam Cooke."

"I wrote the Sam Cooke tribute because I grew up listening to him and the Soulsters," says Newton. "My mother only listened to sacred music, but she made an exception after Cooke left the Soulsters and started his secular career. I grew up



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bathed in his tunes. In fact, he influenced the way I play the flute. He had exquisite vocal phrasing and clarity, exceptional emotive capabilities and a powerful sense of communication. I've tried to incorporate all that into my flute playing."

After recording the duo CD at St. Anthony's Seminary, the acoustically pristine Franciscan monastery in Santa Barbara, Water Lily Acoustics owner Kavi Alexander asked Newton to try his hand at another project with South Indian alto saxophonist Kadri Gopalnath and mridangam drummer P. Svinivasan. The resulting collaboration, *Southern Brothers*, due for June release, is a scintillating jazz-meets-raga feast. "Indian and African American musics both have powerful improvisational traditions," says Newton. "I had to learn the ragas, but I also approached the rhythmic cycles as a jazz musician. It was a fascinating experience because we found places in between our two languages where we could overlap."

The most adventurous of Newton's new CDs, *Above Is*

Above All (Contour), is an electro-acoustic "closet" project that finds him returning full circle to his musical roots. "I think people will really be shocked when they hear it," Newton proudly says of the intriguing collection of originals he recorded with L.A. electro-music maestro Thomas Stones III and Venezuelan flutist Pedro Eustache. "We spent two-and-a-half years on this. We layered and re-orchestrated material over and over again, taking maximum advantage of computers and synthesizers to create music that's sonically imaginative and expansive. But most of all, we wanted the tunes to groove."

Even though Newton's music covers a broad expanse, he says that whether it's classical or jazz, "the common thread is spirituality. Like Mahalia Jackson and John Coltrane, I want to create music that has a spiritual wealth. That's what artistic freedom means to me: having the opportunity to make music that is timeless and comes to grips with eternity."

—Dan Ouellette