

Catching up with Eddie Gale:

Black Rhythm Happening and beyond

"I feel that the musician has a responsibility... not just to the gift that you have as a musician. You owe music something. On this planet, the way we can interpret that is to participate in our communities, to help bring some positiveness to the community... to give back... always giving, always..."

— Eddie Gale, 2003

Unless you live in the San Francisco Bay Area, chances are you probably haven't heard Eddie Gale's music until now. Why is that? How can a master of their instrument, a creator of an inimitable compositional language (and two of the most unique recordings in the Blue Note catalog) who has performed with such diverse luminaries as John Coltrane, Jackie McLean, Cecil Taylor and Sun Ra be practically forgotten in the greater public sphere? Granted, there are many unsung artists in this music, but this essay focuses on Trumpeter/Composer Eddie Gale, who has continued to create music through self-determination from his base in the San Francisco Bay Area. Making the largely necessary choice to self-release his recordings, teach, and do the majority of his concerts on the west coast of North America, Eddie Gale has continued to refine the path he started on with his concept of "ghetto music" — a holistic approach to music, telling the story of his neighborhood and life through sound, and engaging his community in a reciprocal relationship.

Mr. Gale was born and raised in the culturally diverse Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York in 1941. (For more on his childhood and early music experiences, see the liner notes to the 4 Men With Beards re-issue of Eddie Gale's *Ghetto Music*.) It was this neighborhood that formed the basis for his concept of "ghetto music", and which has continued to be his driving force until the present day. "[That neighborhood] had all these elements to draw on. That's why this is ghetto music, because it comes from all of us that lived in that area of the city, that lived this life of music, going to school, learning and growing up. It was all encompassing..."

By the time *Black Rhythm Happening* was recorded, Eddie had already played or studied with many of the Jazz legends of the time: Kenny Dorham, Cecil Taylor, Sun Ra, Jackie McLean, John Coltrane, Larry Young, and many others. To supplement the group that recorded *Ghetto Music*, Mr. Gale added longtime Cecil Taylor associate, Jimmy Lyons, to play alto saxophone, as well as a post-Coltrane Elvin Jones on drums. "You know how strong Elvin is. He can roar like a lion on those drums — so we had him open up, like on 'Mexico Thing.' Rudy would say 'Elvin, there are voices on this recording, you can't come in like that! You can't come in that strong!'"

According to Mr. Gale, the session for *Black Rhythm Happening* was rushed a bit in comparison to his previous Blue Note recording. Despite this, the album continues the programmatic vein and eclectic genre blending (check out Elvin Jones' backbeat on "The Gleeker", for example) as *Ghetto Music*, but with a more refined sense of purpose, and an expanded use of the mixed voices. "The Gleeker" "is reminiscent of a space we had in Brooklyn at the time. One of our friends had a place that we called the Gleeker House —

we would play up there and people would come and party..." Gale's sister, Joann Gale Stevens, who sings and plays guitar on the record, wrote the lyrics to the melody Eddie composed. "Song of Will" juxtaposes voices with the instrumentalists in a solemn, yet hopeful, "song for those who try... a song for we who must do, or die." The free time blues ballad "Ghetto Love Night" talks about "...us young cats, getting our girlfriends (whose parents were leaving for the weekend) and we'd go out to Long Island and have a love night." Roland Alexander's soprano saxophone solo is gorgeously understated and laid back. "Mexico Thing" is about "...being hip on the corner..." as it depicts the hustle and bustle of the neighborhood through excellent features of both Gale and the legendary post-bop saxophonist Jimmy Lyons, who is literally overflowing with ideas and abstract thematic variations in his contribution. The theme acts as an anchor to the hustle, as people standing on a corner might look in a sea of moving bodies. "Look at Teyonda" is a musical representation and blessing of the birth of Gale's daughter, who surprised everyone when she was born at home, delivered by her father. The poetic incantations near the end of the piece, by William Norwood, speak about the astrological significance of Teyonda's birth in both the specific sense, as well as drawing a stellar analogy to the creation of families and communities as the birth of constellations. These stories of life made musical are the last released recordings of the ghetto music group — beginning a nearly ten year break from recording his own projects as Gale made the move to his new life in California.

"The 1970s changed everything, because Blue Note went to United Artists, and that changed the whole complexity of their operations and concept. Frank Wolff (Gale's strongest supporter at Blue Note) became a producer as opposed to a partner, and when things didn't work out with myself and the new president they had, they decided not record me. Frank said, 'Oh, that's no good, they need to keep doing that — they're going to be sorry one day!' He kept trying to get them to let me do another record, but it never did happen..."

In 1971, Eddie Gale received an appointment as artist in residence at Stanford University in California. After one year, Gale decided it would be best for him and his family to move to California, and in 1972, he made San Jose his home, where he remains to this day. Gale's community involvement began immediately, with performances at festivals in Berkeley, and even at half time during a Berkeley/Stanford football game. In an interview upon his arrival in 1971, Gale stated one of his goals in moving west: "I plan to bring music to these people. A music they can rejoice in, a music people can believe in, can come together around, a music that gets away from all these colors and things, and gets us to where we can really communicate with one another without all of these hang ups that society puts on us."

In 1974, Gale was appointed San Jose's Ambassador Of Jazz, by Mayor Norm Mineta. This civic endorsement has continued, with an official Commendation from the mayor's office in 1991 for his achievements in music and community outreach.

1992 saw the release of his first full length commercial recording (that wasn't self-released) in nearly twenty years: *A Minute With Miles*, on the

audiophile label Mapleshade. The story behind the record's title is perhaps not as imagined — keep in mind that the album is made up of almost all Gale originals. Sometime in the late 1960s, Gale "...wanted to thank Miles for a concert in California (the Berkeley Jazz Festival), and tell him what I thought of it. So I went down to the Village Gate, early, to catch him. He was in the green room, playing his horn, but had the door cracked a little bit, so I knocked. He kept on playing, so I knocked again. No answer, so I just pushed it open and walked in. He was there, with his back turned, playing. I said 'Mr. Davis, that was a very nice concert in California, that festival was really nice.' He said 'Hmmp, you were there?' and right there I froze, I started freaking out. I said 'Yeah, I was Cecil Taylor's trumpet player' — he spun around and looked at me, and I ran out the room... That was my minute with Miles."

Self determination has been one of the driving forces to Gale's post ghetto music work: "I can't have a record company making my music world work. I can't depend on a producer getting me a gig. I have to make it work myself, because I don't want anyone else to be the judge of what I can do or not do as an artist."

One of Gale's current pursuits is his Inner Peace Orchestra, which has released several recordings, and is "a special part of my career that deals with world peace through music." He has been putting on concerts for world peace for a number of years throughout California. The temptation to cynically dismiss this lofty goal withers when you are in the company of Mr. Gale, who exudes a confidence and passion for his beliefs that cannot be denied. "I feel that the musician has a responsibility... not just to the gift that you have as a musician. You owe music something. On this planet, the way we can interpret that is to participate in our communities, to help bring some positiveness to the community. You have to mean what you say. Life will teach you what you need to know to accomplish these goals... The arts, like music, are about always learning. You always have to learn something, there's no end to it."

Gale continues to work with his small combos, with younger Free Jazz groups (like Forward Energy), and even spent time playing with The Coup, a Bay Area Hip Hop group that uses live instrumentation at their concerts.

Gale's community involvement doesn't stop with performing. He spent three years as artist in residence at San Jose State University, teaching courses on improvisation and jazz history, which Gale explains, "I teach from the point of view of lived experience". His weekly improvisation courses continue at the University, through private funding. Gale also runs weekly improvisation workshops in Oakland, at a performance venue called 21 Grand — a nexus of the improvised music scene in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The re-release of Gale's first two recordings as a leader is momentous for people interested in the history of creative improvised music in the 20th century. Despite this, I hope this essay has shown that Eddie Gale has continued, unabated, refining his techniques and approach, outside the market, and under the radar.

"Listen, in my life, everything is free form, out of sight. Living is what's happening — enjoying life, expressing all the things that life is really about and that you can experience and bring into some form, through your art — whatever your art may be..."

Andrew Raffo Dewar
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Middletown, Connecticut



Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are Eddie Gale's, from an interview conducted by Andrew Raffo Dewar March 10th, 2003 in San Jose, California.

NOTES:

1. "Ghetto Music Arrives: Eddie Gale" *Stanford Daily*, 22 November 1971. Vol. 160, No. 41.
2. Qtd. in Bendel, Joseph. "Black Rhythm Happening". *Signal To Noise*. Spring 2001. pp. 24-26.

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Eddie Gale can be reached for booking or further information through his website, <http://www.eddiegale.com>. To find out more about the San Francisco Bay Area creative music scene: <http://www.transbaycalendar.org> <http://www.bayimproviser.com>

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