Eddie Gale's Ghetto Music:

Testifying for the Neighborhood

"...the entire planet Earth is a ghetto in relationship to the rest of the universe..."
— Eddie Gale, 1970 [1]

In 1968, Trumpeter/Composer Eddie Gale entered Rudy Van Gelder's legendary New Jersey studio with sixteen musicians and singers and recorded the album you now hold in your hands — one of the most unique sessions Blue Note records ever committed to tape. For some reason, this powerful, inventive music has been unavailable in any format since its original release nearly 35 years ago. It is characterized by both the free-blowing density typical of late 1960s New York "Free Jazz", as well as a refreshing use of advanced compositional techniques, a sensitive spaciousness, vivid timbral colors, and creative, layered configurations of a large instrumental ensemble with mixed voices.

To talk about this music, though, is to talk about the life of Eddie Gale, and life in his neighborhood as it is manifested in the music. As the posters produced by Blue Note to announce the album's original release stated, Eddie Gale's *Ghetto Music* is "A personal portrait...emerging to play a significant role in the life experience of the community as a whole."

Born in 1941, Mr. Gale grew up in Bedford-Stuyvesant, one of the oldest neighborhoods in Brooklyn. Bed-Stuy, as it is popularly known, is New York City's largest African-American neighborhood, and is the result of a historic merging between two distinct communities. Bedford was established in the 1600s by the Dutch West India Company, who bought the land from the Canarsie Indians. The new neighborhood included the two important free Black communities of Weeksville and Carrville.[2] Weeksville was named for James Weeks, an African-American who purchased land there in pre-Civil War 1838 — no small feat at the time. It was home to the first female African-American physician in New York state, and the first African-American police officer in New York City. It had its own schools and churches, and one of the first African-American newspapers, the *Freedman's Torchlight*.[3] The second half of modern day Bed-Stuy was upper-middle class Stuyvesant Heights, to the east, which was established during the 1890s. The two communities existed separately until merging in the 1930s, and were home to a diverse population of Irish, German, African, Scottish and Dutch descended peoples. Bedford-Stuyvesant has produced a wealth of renowned musicians, from Jazz musicians like Max Roach, Eubie Blake and Randy Weston, to Pop singers Stephanie Mills and Aaliyah, and Hip Hop icons Biggie Smalls, Li'l Kim and Fab 5 Freddy.[4]

It is significant that Eddie Gale's neighborhood was formed from the union of two historically important African-American communities with what was originally a European-American neighborhood — much like the organic, personalized fusion of music traditions that occurs in Mr. Gale's music.

It was in this ethnically rich and culturally mixed environment that Eddie grew up and began to find his way into music. He began playing bugle in the Cub Scouts when he was 8 years old, taking part in marching bands, which as a teenager led him to being a part of the welcoming committee that met Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie during one of his visits to New York. "Marching in those parades all those years, with the bugles at our sides, it gave you a sense of pride, in a physical sense, to march like that and stand-up-right..." [5] In "A Walk with Thee," "that's what I was after, trying to work to express that, to get into something that had that feeling, the pride, you know... 'A Walk with Thee', meaning a walk with your higher self."

"I had early [trumpet] lessons in the boy scouts...all the songs in the key of G, you know...You take lessons from different teachers, you learn how to read [music] and understand theoretically what's going on, but the real experience of getting into so-called Jazz music was a whole different thing, a whole different world. The only way for me was to get in there and live it. Basically, you did jams — sitting in — because the guys in my neighborhood were all about you being able to sit in with the various musicians in the area as well as those who would come in from out of town. That's how you learned the real idea of this music, and this is where you got the experiences. The Jazz lesson was being on the scene with the musicians who do that, by learning from their travels and life experiences." "The Rain" is about "the life burdens that we have as people growing up. You really want to be a part of things, you want to hustle." The hopeful lyrics were penned by Gale's sister Joanne, who sings and plays guitar on the record.[6] Joanne was influenced very much by Joan Baez. I liked her also." Ms. Gale has since worked for the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and written a biography on daredevil Evil Kneivel.

Eddie also studied early on with Bebop/Hard Bop trumpet legend Kenny Dorham. "I used to go in the snow to Kenny's house.

I lived on Atlantic Avenue...and I believe he was on President Street in Crown Heights. I used to walk across town to get my lesson. Bud Powell lived around the corner from me...Sometimes he would stand outside my gate and listen to me practice." [6]

Growing up in the cultural hotbed of New York in the 1950s was understandably a major formative force on Eddie's approach to music. "I was very fortunate in those times. Everyone was on the scene then in New York. I don't care what kind of music you were into, you had all the giants — whatever it was, there was everything. It was nothing to walk the streets and see Harry Belafonte going into the same restaurant — 'Hey man, how you doing' — because you lived there, it was the culture." Fulton Street "was like a marketplace street. In the daytime, [there was] shopping going on, and at night you'd have the nightlife. I used to go shine shoes on the corner of Fulton and O streets as a kid. Across the street from where I was shining shoes was a nightclub, the Baby Grand." In that world Gale began performing with his first group, the Afro Jazz Lab Band. "We had trumpet, tenor sax, vibes, trap drums, timbales, congas...we played every weekend. A lot of it was downstairs parties or celebrations where we'd get hired to play." One of the community functions the group played at was for African-American leader Malcolm X.

After a time, Gale began to play with Sun Ra's Monday night big band at Slug's on East 3rd Street. Gale recorded on a number of Sun Ra's albums throughout the years, such as the 1965 *Secrets of the Sun* and 1978's *Lanquidity*.

"From the early '60s, I was playing and learning from Sun Ra, until he left this planet. His was one of the groups that I'd step aside from being a leader to go play with. I'm still trying to realize things I learned from Sun Ra with his whole understanding of Egyptology, and life, and space, and his ways of phonetics, his understanding of word play...There are things there that I am still trying to research. Some things I just leave alone and let live within me." [7]

Early formative experiences sitting in with John Coltrane and Sun Ra saxophone legend John Gilmore were important as well. "The first time I sat in with John [Coltrane] I think was at the Half Note, or the Five Spot...people were listening so intently. You could feel the listening...Because he touched on...spiritual nerves of music, hitting those nerves, those tones of spirituality, getting to play with John was just overwhelming." [8]

Through his work with Sun Ra, Gale came to the attention of pianist Cecil Taylor in 1965, who invited him to work with his ensemble. That group eventually recorded the abstract masterpiece *Unit Structures* for Blue Note in 1966 — parts of which were later released in the *Smithsonian Collection* of Classic Jazz. This first association with Blue Note sparked an interest in Gale's music by Blue Note co-founder Francis Wolff, who eventually produced *Ghetto Music*, after Eddie explained the concept of the music: "It's not strictly rhythm and blues and it's not strictly jazz and it's not strictly Jewish folk music, so people are sometimes confused by what I mean when I use the term 'ghetto' to describe what I'm doing. But they answer their own question when they put it that way. As a Black artist from a ghetto. I'm in a position to see that the entire planet Earth is a ghetto in relationship to the rest of the universe, and I'm using that term to describe my music because along with expressing my experience of Bedford-Stuyvesant where I was born, I want to express my experience of living in the whole world as well. That means being in touch with and using all kinds of expressions." [9]

The multitude of expressions Gale assembled for his Ghetto Music group around 1966 included vocalists Elaine Beener (the lead singer of the Noble Gale Singers) and Fulumi Prince from Nigerian drummer Babatunde Olatunji's ensemble. Gale made a point to stick with community musicians from his neighborhood, many of whom were (and remain) unknowns — a rarity for Blue Note recordings, which usually drew from a specific pool of well-known musicians for its sessions. "First they tried to get me to use different people, but I said, 'No, these people that are working with me, and these ideas I've been rehearsing, these are the folks that I want...I don't care if they're known or not.' I wanted to catch that feeling, that sound, that naturalness, of these people that live in this community, in this state, in this world of New York Jazz. They are the people that walk the streets everyday, so they can express these ideas."

The album cover features a starkly beautiful photo of the ensemble dressed in the robes they wore for performances, with Eddie's two dogs to complete the portrait. Gale says the robes were used to "...really go deep within myself to express the sprit of what we were about...I felt this helped to show the 'innerness' to people...[for] all the performers to have something on...[that] they don't wear everyday." He explained that the ritual and theatrical aspects of Sun Ra's music were a departure point for the group, as well as the Jazz recordings with voices made by Max Roach (1960's *Freedom Now! Suite*) and Donald Byrd's 1963 Blue Note album *A New Perspective*.

Although one might be tempted to frame the "Ghetto Music" concept as tied ideologically to Black nationalism, Mr. Gale is quick to point out that, "Our society has us believing 'Oh, they're Black, so they must be with this and that'...but our society gives us those things. They make us look at each other like that. But what's going on inside? Listen to the music! There's no hate in this music!" Eddie Gale's comments illuminate the meaning of this music; especially his thoughts on the piece "A Understanding": "You have to get understanding about what things mean in order to enjoy life and go forward in life...you have to get some understanding of yourself...culture and all that is there too, but the main thing is self understanding. Who you are after that is something else —

what race you belong to, that's all different. You have to get yourself together first. World peace through inner peace, not through these political choices..."

Andrew Raffo Dewar
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Middletown, Connecticut

NOTES:

1. Qtd. in Levin, Robert. "The Third World". Jazz and Pop, June 1970.
2. Bed-Stuy Online. "History". http://bedstuyonline.com/History/intro-frames.htm
3. Society for the Preservation of Weeksville. http://www.weeksvillesociety.org/introduction.html
4. Bed-Stuy Online. "Culture". http://bedstuyonline.com/Culture/intro-frames.htm
5. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are Eddie Gale's, from an interview conducted by Andrew Raffo Dewar on 10 March 2003 in San Jose, California.
6. Qtd. in Bendel, Joseph. "Black Rhythm Happening". Signal to Noise. Spring 2001. pp. 24-26
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Qtd. in Levin.

Eddie Gale recorded one more record for Blue Note after *Ghetto Music — Black Rhythm Happening* — before moving to California to become artist-in-residence at Stanford University in 1971. He moved his family to San Jose, California in 1972, and has been living and performing there ever since. He was named 'San Jose's Ambassador of Jazz' by the mayor in 1974. Community involvement has continued to be an important part of his work output, through teaching classes on improvisation and Jazz history at San Jose State University, yearly *Concerts for World Peace* (with his Inner Peace Orchestra),and his active participation in the thriving San Francisco Bay Area creative improvised music scene. His post *Ghetto Music* accomplishments are described in detail in the new liner notes to the Four Men with Beards re-issue of *Black Rhythm Happening*.

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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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