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Heritage Ensemble Plays BAM Café, Blends Jewish Melodies with Jazz Beat

By Francesca Norsen Tate

Eugene Marlow's Heritage Ensemble marries musical cultures.

The Heritage Ensemble's passion and specialty is giving Hebrew melodies a new twist, bringing in jazz, Afro-Cuban and Brazilian styles. The band's founder and composer/arranger Eugene Marlow, is a Renaissance man — a pianist, world-traveler, composer, published author, and professor. Perhaps it is by musical design that Marlow chose to live in Brooklyn, itself a bridge for many cultures.

The Heritage Ensemble performs regularly at the Nuyorican Poets Café on the Lower East Side, and has given concerts at Congregation Mount Sinai and the Brooklyn Heights Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library. This coming Saturday, The Heritage Ensemble is a featured group at BAMCafé.

Marlow's own heritage is multi-national — European and Russian — and musical. His English-born father was a well-known violinist and composer who introduced his young son Gene to music — in particular jazz. After graduation from the High School of Performing Arts (New York City), young Gene Marlow worked at the United Nations for six months where he experienced "a real mix of cultures." He said "I was at the UN during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. I think that began to solidify my world view."

Marlow matriculated at Herbert Lehman College, which also had a strong international student population. "Along with a four-year stint in the Air Force, my whole background seems to have led to having a very global view of things."



The Heritage Ensemble in concert



Eugene Marlow at a recording session

Dr. Billy Taylor: a "jazz father"

While Marlow's own dad introduced him to jazz, Marlow says the late Dr. Billy Taylor "was my jazz father."

Taylor, who died in December 2010, was the jazz correspondent on "CBS Sunday Morning" for 15 years. He and Bill Cosby went to school together, earning their doctoral degrees. Dr. Taylor was a pianist, arranger, composer, radio announcer, and the first African-American band leader on the David Frost Show many years ago. Marlow credits Billy Taylor as one of his great teachers and mentors.



Dr. Eugene Marlow with Dr. Billy Taylor

"He was really a jazz statesman. He just didn't do one thing. He started JazzMobile.

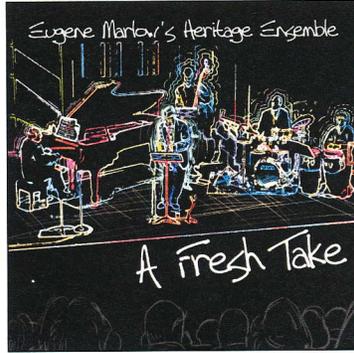
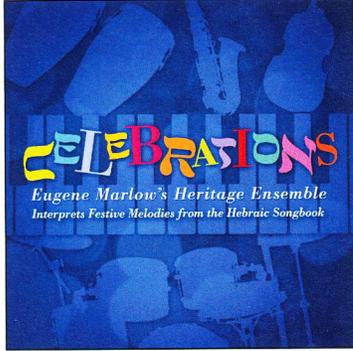
He is my model for an eclectic musical life. I was very fortunate to be accepted as one of several dozen students in an ASCAP sponsored jazz songwriting workshop in 1981. Taylor was the leader of this workshop. He taught me a lot about how to teach," says Marlow. In a class whose age range stretched from 18 to 60, Dr. Taylor "... dealt with each one of us as if we were the only one in the room. Everybody was dealt with on their terms, and one-on-one, even though all of us were in the room. It was really an amazing lesson in how to teach. He was very generous. I had meals with him. He listened to my music. He was always encouraging. When he passed away, I was heartbroken."

The Evolution of The Heritage Ensemble

Marlow's Heritage Ensemble is now in its third generation. It started with Marlow writing a few arrangements of several traditional Hebraic melodies for piano, bass and drums many years ago. Today, its repertoire has over two dozen arrangements and original compositions. They've recorded two albums. With Marlow on piano, the ensemble now consists of bass player Frank Wagner, saxophonist Michael Hashim, and any number of percussionists, including

Cristian Rivera, Obanilu Allende, and Matthew Gonzales.

A key performer in The Heritage Ensemble is multi-Grammy nominee drummer Bobby Sanabria, who is also a co-producer on their recent albums: *A Fresh Take* (2011) and *Celebrations: Festive Melodies from the Hebraic Songbook* (2010).



The Heritage Ensemble albums *Celebrations* (2010) and *A Fresh Take* (2011)

Marlow and Sanabria met at a Jazz Journalists Association Awards event. Marlow recalls, "I had invited him to be a performer at the Milton Hinton Jazz Perspectives Concert Series that I curate at Baruch College (City University of New York). At the end of the concert I gave him my first album from 2005. The next day, he sent me an email saying 'you're really very talented. Why don't you come up and listen to my Afro-Cuban jazz orchestra at the Manhattan School of Music?' So I did, and went almost every week — every Thursday, for several months. One day, he came to me and asked, 'Do you have any big band pieces for this group? I said, sure. That was the beginning of a close working relationship.'"

In fact, Bobby Sanabria premiered another work of Gene's — *The Griot's Tale* — on March 27 at the Manhattan School of Music.

"Bobby always adds some touches here and there to The Heritage Ensemble's performances. It works. It gels. Everyone gets along, everyone is very professional. Nobody is a prima donna. It's gotten to a point that we all trust each other. For example, bassist Frank Wagner decided a couple of months ago, on one of our pieces ("Bilbililos": Rock from whose store we have eaten) that, after my intro, instead of going into the rhythmic pattern, he was going to do a solo, and then take us into the rhythmic pattern.

"Everyone makes a contribution. It's always a work in progress. Every set is a

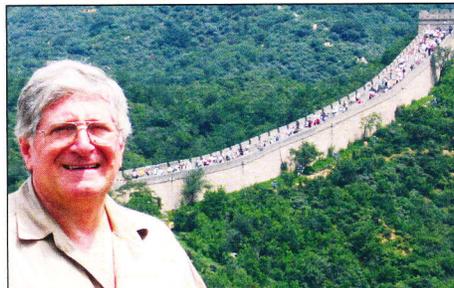
little different. It's within a structure, but there's room for movement and improvisation. Everybody has a strong flair," says Marlow.

"We always try to keep the audience in mind. We're not there just to play for ourselves. It's about the audience. If we don't engage the audience in the first 30 seconds, we might as well go home."

The same level of thought goes into arranging the Hebraic melodies. "In a way, I'm doing a Reconstructionist 'riff' on the Jewish melodies by reinterpreting them in contemporary terms. What are the possibilities here? How can we adapt this particular melody that's 500 years old into contemporary terms, but still keep the integrity of the melody?" Marlow adds, "There's a very strong relationship between jazz and Jews."

Jazz in the Land of the Dragon

Marlow has also discovered a strong relationship between China and jazz. He is working assiduously on a book titled *Jazz in the Land of the Dragon*, hoping to complete the first draft by the end of the summer.



Eugene Marlow at the Great Wall of China

This adventure began in 1999 when a Baruch colleague invited Marlow to give a presentation at the Shanghai School of Film and Television about media in America. Although "fairly-well traveled," with experience in the Air Force, Marlow at first resisted the invitation, but then discovered layers of jazz history.

"I started researching, and all of a sudden discovered this huge history of jazz, not only in Shanghai, but other parts of China. There's a long history that

goes back to the opium wars in the middle of the 19th century, and back to the end of the 18th century." Over two years he compiled a list of all the indigenous jazz musicians in Shanghai and Beijing — two very different cities — and "came away in 2006 with almost three dozen interviews, and an incredible, fascinating experience. I also learned about the culture of China."

Jazz in the Land of the Dragon focuses on "the evolution of jazz in China that parallels the political, social, and economic developments of China. So, it isn't just about all these jazz players. It's really about China in the 20th century, and how the two are mixed."

Upcoming Gigs

The Heritage Ensemble's April 7 performance at BAM Café features vocalist Rachel Kara Perez. Also a Brooklynite, Perez will be singing two originals: with lyrics she wrote and music by Marlow. Perez is also the vocalist on the "Adon Olam" ("Lord of the World") arrangement on their "A Fresh Take" album. The set begins at 10 p.m. BAM Café is at 30 Lafayette Avenue.

Marlow is writing a special piece called "Remembrance," based on a book that his mother's younger sister, Ruth, wrote in part about the "Kristallnacht" tragedy in Leipzig, Germany in 1938. The work will be premiered May 20 at 1 p.m. at the Kupferberg Holocaust Resource Center on the campus of Queensborough Community College.

The Heritage Ensemble next performs at the Nuyorican Poets Café on May 25.

"We actually have booked more gigs in 2012 than in 2011, and I want more. This is such a professional group, when I say on the set that I'm really honored that they play with me, I really mean it. What we play, regardless of the melody, is really just the starting point. What we do with them — by incorporating jazz, Afro-Cuban, Brazilian, and neo-classical styles — transcends age and cultural background."

The New York Jazz Record agrees. It has described The Heritage Ensemble as "A cross-cultural collaboration that spins & grooves." Eugene Marlow's Heritage Ensemble is truly a marriage of musical cultures.