

Russell Gunn

Having earned his performance stripes in straight-ahead style while turning on to the mid-80s hip hop sounds of Rakim and LL Cool J, horn dynamo Russell Gunn inventively marries the rhythmic music of his youth with a headturning combination of brass-driven jazz, blues, funk, and anything else he might be into on a particular day. The blend comes together with remarkable poise and harmony on **ETHNOMUSICOLOGY VOLUME 1** his Atlantic debut.

A native of East St. Louis, Illinois, Gunn has already made a name for himself as an exceptional player with a series of acclaimed solo releases: 1994's **YOUNG GUNN** (released in an expanded form in 1998 as **YOUNG GUNN PLUS**), 1997's **GUNN FU**, and this year's reflective **LOVE REQUIEM** suite.

As recently as 1994, the artist earned rave critical notices across the country for his performance in Wynton Marsalis's celebrated oratorio, *Blood On The Fields* (incidentally, that's Wynton heard talking about the blues following "Shiva"). He has also worked with such prominent artists as Oliver Lake, Lou Reed, Buckshot LeFonque, Jimmy Heath, James Moody, Roy Hargrove, John Hicks, and Maxwell - who included Gunn on his popular MTV **UNPLUGGED** EP and **EMBRYA** album. He has performed as a band leader at such New York City clubs as Birdland, the 5-Spot, Sweet Basil, and the Jazz Standard, where just last year he played week-long engagement - impressing the New York Post with "his seriousness of purpose, focus and clarity."

In speaking to Gunn's versatility, *Down Beat* is especially on target: "In this age of bebop/hip hop, either/or paradigms, Gunn is one of the few musicians who can blow clarion, butter-toned licks that can fit in Wynton's jazz oratorio, brother Branford's acid-jazz Buckshot LeFonque CD... or Oliver Lake's avant ensemble and not be accused of fronting." As its title suggests, the album is a diverse amalgamation of modern black music sounds and styles, as absorbed and expressed through Gunn's unique compositional and performance voice.

"Every song is a study in black music on all different levels," says Gunn. "I call it **VOLUME ONE** because there's more to come." That idea is wonderfully realized through Gunn's recording of such songs as Branford Marsalis's "The Blackwidow Blues," which contains spoken phrases from hip hop's Jeru The Damaja, and "Woody 1 On The New Ark" by hard bop trumpet legend Woody Shaw.

Gunn's 1999 course in *Enthnomusicology* kicks off in smooth style with "74 Miles Away," an old school album intro that includes a voiceover from the man himself. Using a phased-out voice that recalls Marvin the Martian, he informs listeners that the only school supplies necessary to comprehend the collection's curriculum are "an open mind and two ears." "The way I did the introduction, it's really serious but it's disguised with a bit of humor," says Gunn, who has lived in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn for the past five years.

Further illustrating the scope of the album's black music study are samples from such rap legends as Kurtis Blow and Run-DMC. Add to that mix one DJ Apollo, who, in addition to his solo recordings, has also collaborated with Buckshot LeFonque. Among his textural turntable contributions to the album, the steel wheel spinner takes the spotlight with the crisp "DJ Apollo Interlude."

"There're so many things that have influenced me in my life," says Gunn. "I feel I'm shortchanging myself if I just go in and play some show tune chord progressions instead of really dealing with all the things that

have made a true impact on me. I have traveled around the world and heard a lot of great music. I heard a lot when I was in East St. Louis. I live in Brooklyn now and I hear everything that goes on there - the sounds coming out of apartment windows and cars driving by. I have to incorporate those things into what I do."

Echoing that sentiment, Down Beat has said of the horn player, "When you see Gunn in his trademark braids and baggy pants, you realize that the issue for him is not whether jazz or hip hop should reign supreme, but that they both articulate the complexities of modern Afro-American music." Produced by Gunn and Yves Beauvais (James Carter, Cyrus Chestnut, Madeleine Peyroux producer), the boundary-breaking and thought-provoking ETHNOMUSICOLOGY features Gunn performing primarily on trumpet and flugelhorn, carving out a bright, smart sound that effectively propels jazz further into the future.

Together with his own band - which includes Gregory Tardy (tenor saxophone, flute, bass clarinet), Bruce Williams (alto saxophone, Eb clarinet), James Hurt (piano, Fender Rhodes, organ), Rodney Jordan (bass), and Woody Williams (drums) - Gunn launches into tracks ranging from the super-charged sax-and-scratch of "Shiva" to the go-go-propelled funk of "Sybil's Blues" to the truly steamy "Doll."

"This is album is for people that like music," declares Gunn as he contemplates the album's wealth of styles. "That's who I make music for. If you don't like music, then you probably won't like this album." While his skills have never been called into question, Gunn was initially perceived as a maverick among his fellow New York City jazz players. As was often the case, the inter-personal roadblocks were simply a matter of bookcover judgments.

"When I first moved to New York I was misunderstood," he says. "I would go out to the club and would go to these jam sessions. People wouldn't call me up to the bandstand. I'd have my hair braided and some boots on and jeans. I played just as well as everybody else but there was always the idea that, 'Oh, he can't possibly be a serious jazz musician.' You know, it makes no fucking difference. I was born in 1971, not 1931." For Gunn, remaining true to himself on the outside goes to the heart of his overall identity and sense of self, while interlocking with the musical and cultural explorations of ETHNOMUSICOLOGY.

"I always had to deal with people saying to me, 'Oh, so-and-so will never hire you because you wear your hair that way,'" he says. "But I always felt, 'Fuck those people.' Eventually, if you stick to what you believe in, it'll all work out. I see so many people put on their best Easter suit, get up on stage, and sound like shit. But they'll be on the gig because they look the part. Don't get me wrong, I like to wear nice suits just like anybody else does. But I also like to wear my Timberlands and jeans. And I like to wear my hair like I want to - I'm black and that's who I am."

Gunn traveled to New York City from the Midwest at the invitation of saxophonist Oliver Lake - renowned as the founder of the World Saxophone Quartet free jazz ensemble, a member of the Black Artist's Group of the late '60s/early '70s, and an active player on New York City's "loft jazz" scene.

"I was in St. Louis playing at a club called Cicero's," recalls Gunn. "Oliver, who's also originally from St. Louis, happened to be in town and was at the club. He heard me play and invited me to come to New York for a gig at the Brooklyn Museum."

One night, shortly after he'd performed with Lake, Gunn was on stage during a jam session at the Blue Note in Manhattan. It was to be the scene of a great twist of fate. The New York Post recounted the story in a Gunn profile. It was 4 a.m. and most of the musicians and audience had headed home, but Gunn was playing with great energy and little regard for the oncoming sunrise.

"In the house was an assistant to Wynton Marsalis, Denis Jeter, who was so impressed by Gunn that he

recommended that (Wynton) Marsalis hire him for the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra," wrote Chip Deffaa.

"We exchanged numbers," remembers Gunn of his meeting with Jeter. "A few weeks later, he called me because Wynton was looking for the third trumpet player for Blood on the Fields. I got lucky."

Marsalis, who is well known for his encouragement and fostering of student players, remembered meeting the impressive young trumpeter during a visit to Gunn's East St. Louis high school.

"So one day I'm in St. Louis, doing nothing," says Gunn, "and the next thing you know - the very next week - I'm at Lincoln Center. It was an eye-opening experience." One night during a Lincoln Center performance, Gunn's playing similarly caught the attention of Branford Marsalis, who was on hand to hear his brother's work. Before long, Branford had similarly recruited Gunn to join his road-hungry Buckshot LeFonque ensemble. In addition to hitting almost every corner of the U.S. and Europe during the group's 1995 -1996 tour, Gunn also contributed to 1997's MUSIC EVOLUTION album. By that time, rest assured, Gunn was far from being passed over at any open jam session.

Russell Gunn was nine-years-old when his family moved from Chicago to East St. Louis, Illinois. A year later, he picked up the trumpet and began his nearly decade long membership in the school band.

"I always found music interesting," he says. "Even when I was a really little boy, I would always be singing or dancing or something - some kind of entertainment. It was always in me."

At the beginning, however, trumpet and jazz music were far from the first thing on Russell's mind. "My first love was rap," he says. "And it still is a great love. When I was rappin' as a kid, I really took the time to construct my rhymes well and make sure my metaphors and hooks were above-and-beyond anything anybody in the neighborhood or on the radio was doing. My first - I would say idol - was LL Cool J. When the 'RADIO' record came out, I decided that's what I wanted to be. I patterned everything around trying to be like LL."

A serious and ambitious teenager, Gunn had made a silent deal with himself: if the career in hip hop he was dreaming of didn't materialize by the time he was 16-years-old, he would move on to new territory.

"I was always doing school talent shows," says Gunn. "Anything - making demos, I was doing it all. I really thought I was good, but 16 came and nothing had changed so I moved on... as I said I would."

Though Russell had been playing the trumpet since fourth grade, the instrument was not the obvious focus for his next targeted campaign.

"I can remember, even in high school, saying, 'Man, this is bullshit. I don't even know why I'm wasting my time with this thing.' I was saying to myself, 'You're never going to get it,' but that was because I didn't understand the music yet. I didn't understand the jazz language, but I was trying. I always tried, because I thought it was just so fascinating, the whole improvisation element of the music."

Gunn's interest was fueled under the instruction and inspiration of his cousin, Anthony Wiggins, a featured trumpet player in their high school band, and also by their high school band teacher Ron Carter (not to be confused with the bassist).

"Mr. Carter was a lot more than a band director," says Gunn. "Where I went to school was, you know, you couldn't get more ghetto. Well, Mr. Carter was a father to a lot of students that didn't have them. He was a mother to a lot of students that didn't have mothers. Most of all he was a source of primary guidance. He was a person who cared when most people didn't care. Because Mr. Carter cared about us...

we cared about him and the music. People would hear us and they would say, 'Damn, what is this, a Performing Arts High School?' But man, this was as Public as it gets."

From East St. Louis, Gunn graduated to Jackson State University in Mississippi, where he was awarded a full scholarship. "I was lucky, because during the time I spent at Jackson State, there were so many players," says Gunn. "I was surrounded by a slew of musicians that had the same goals in mind - including Rodney Jordan, who plays bass on the album." After spending two years at Jackson State, he returned to St. Louis and took periodic work with cruise ship jazz outfits. It was that experience, in part, that brought Gunn closer to finding his music.

"I just want to be as original as possible. I want to keep growing as an artist. I want to maintain my integrity as an artist."