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Bio information: **REVOLUTIONARY SNAKE ENSEMBLE**

Title: **FORKED TONGUE** (Cuneiform Rune 269)

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**FILE UNDER: JAZZ**

*"Musical innovator Ken Field...[drags] the brass band into the 21st century." – Seth Rogovoy, Berkshire Eagle*

*"Boston's own rabble of horn players and drummers bring a positively Sun Ra shine to second-line music" – Jed Gottlieb, The Boston Herald*

Dressed a la Mardi Gras in feathered masks and multi-colored, sequined costumes, playing music that riotously combines the rhythms of New Orleans brass bands with improvisation and heaping undercurrents of funk, the **Revolutionary Snake Ensemble** inhabits that rare musical planet on which **Sun Ra**, **James Brown**, **George Clinton & Parliament Funkadelic** and a myriad of **New Orleans** marching bands jointly reside. Based physically in Boston since forming in 1990, the horn and percussion-based group is led by saxophonist/composer **Ken Field**, who describes it as "a funk and street beat brass band, playing New Orleans and other modern improvised celebratory styles." The Snakes' music is rooted in the New Orleans tradition of jazz funerals – a tradition unique to the birthplace of jazz – which began with a 'first line' procession to the burial ground, a brass band playing hymns in a funeral dirge. Afterwards, there was a celebration of the deceased's life, with a 'second line' of musicians playing up-tempo music celebrating the miracle of life. Playing Field's original compositions and rearrangements of traditional tunes, opening up new avenues for improvisation, the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble celebrates, expands, and transforms the brass band tradition – a tradition, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, that is now in diaspora.

A saxophonist/composer/improviser, Ken Field is one of Boston's most dedicated and versatile musicians. Since 1988, he has been a member of **Birdsongs of the Mesozoic**, a New Music/chamber rock ensemble that began as a spin-off of the legendary **Mission of Burma**. Birdsongs has recorded seven internationally acclaimed CDs on **Cuneiform Records**, including the recent **Extreme Spirituals**, which features the bass/baritone of noted African American vocalist **Oral Moses**. Field also has an active solo career. An improviser and composer of classical/New Music, he has performed internationally and released four solo discs [*Subterranea*, (O.O.Discs), *Pictures of Motion* (sFz), *Tokyo in F* (Sublingual), and *Under the Skin* (Innova)] and performed internationally. Field has composed music for animation, film and video, and music for **Bridgman/Packer Dance**, soundtrack work for television, including music for **Sesame Street** and **PBS**. As a performer, he has worked as a sideman with countless renowned reggae, funk, R&B, rock, jazz and world beat artists – and played a gig for former **President Bill Clinton**. Field is also the long-standing host of **The New Edge**, a Boston-based weekly radio show featuring a broad range of creative instrumental music.

The **Revolutionary Snake Ensemble** formed in 1990, when Field assembled an improvisational horn and percussion group with trumpeter and cartoonist **Scott Getchell** to entertain at a pagan women's ritual celebration. Field decided to continue the project, conceiving it initially as an improvisational group rooted in Boston's free jazz/improv scene. But the group "soon started playing some of my original pieces plus obscure music by **John Scofield**, **Sun Ra**, **Ornette Coleman**, and others, mostly with a New Orleans funky marching groove," recalls Field. As New Orleans brass band and Mardi Gras music began playing ever-increasing roles in the band's repertoire, the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble came into its own. Speaking of the Snake's music as though it were a bowl of New Orleans gumbo, which begins with a classic roux, critic Dan Oullette noted that it "captures the abandon of a street parade while expanding its stylistic scope...it's got the essential ingredients spiced with fresh flavors". *Performer Magazine* noted that the band

*"...may operate from the traditions of New Orleans music, but the boundaries are pushed wide open when they actually play. "We mostly play from 'head' charts, where everyone has the melody and chord changes in front of them. Since there's no guitar or keyboard, the horns can not only solo, they...even alter the harmonies spontaneously," Field said. "So there's a lot of improvisation. I also conduct some of the arrangements live..."*

For both the band and their audiences, notes *Performer*, "Doing all of the high art ministrations of improvisation and having an audible party at the same time really is the best of both worlds."

Combining their "booty-shaking and brain stimulating music" [*Splendid*] with over-the-top/outrageous costumes – feathered masks and sequined robes from a wardrobe shared by Mardi Gras and **Sun Ra** – the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble's performances soon became one of Boston's most-beloved 'events'. They played everywhere in town - from private parties (they re-arranged a **Billy Idol/William Broad** tune for a White family wedding) and clubs, to such revered institutions as **Harvard** and other Boston universities, and the **Boston Museum of Fine Art**. While usually averaging 7 members, the ensemble's lineup and size shifted over time and for specific events. Over the years, the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble "tribe" came from all corners of Boston's music scene. Notable musicians who have performed as part of RSE through the years include **Dana Colley** (*Morphine*), **Jesse Williams** (*Al Kooper/Duke Robillard*), **Russ Gershon** (*Either/Orchestra*), **Eric Paull** (*DJ Logic, Clem Snide*), **Ken Winokur** (*Alloy Orchestra*), **Charlie Kohlhas** (*John Tchicai/Leroy Jenkins/Anthony Braxton*), **Jim Prescott** (*G Love & Special Sauce*), **Kimon Kirk** (*Aimee Mann, Session Americana*), **Scott Getchell** (*Lars Vegas, Skull Session*), **Dave Harris** (*Naftule's Dream, Les Miserables Brass Band*), and **Bob Pilkington** (*Chandler Travis Philharmonic*). Since 1990 they had played over 200 events. Repeatedly nominated in their **Best Music Poll** by the *Boston Phoenix* and WFNX Radio, the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble has been twice nominated by a panel of music writers and critics for a **Boston Music Award**.

In 2003, the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble released their first CD, **Year of the Snake**, on **Innova Recordings**. Recorded in 2002, it included music by Field as well as **Sun Ra**, **John Scofield**, **James Brown**, and others, and liner notes written by two-time Grammy-winning New Orleans music producer **Scott Billington**. It also included a track, "Parade of Numbers", originally recorded for an animated counting piece on *Sesame Street*, a widely-broadcast children's television program. **Year of the Snake** brought the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble's music to an international audience. Receiving considerable public, radio, and press acclaim, the studio recording was included on best-of-year lists from New York City's NPR affiliate

WNYC, the *Gambit Weekly* in New Orleans, and Radio Popolare in Milan, Italy. The first pressing sold out in two months. Revolutionary Snake Ensemble began taking their show on the road, accepting out of town gigs at NYC's **Tonic**, the **Brooklyn Academy of Music**, the **Puffin Cultural Forum**, and the **John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts** in Washington, DC. They also began taking their show on the *rail*. Beginning in 2004, in a unique arrangement with Amtrak, America's national rail line, the Snakes began an annual pilgrimage to Mardi Gras on Amtrak's Crescent train, performing their music en route. On arrival, the Snake Ensemble has marched yearly with the all-women **Krewe of Muses** in their New Orleans Mardi Gras parade. After Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans on August 29, 2005, devastating the city where where countless jazz artists made their homes, the Snake's pilgrimage assumed a more poignant note.

The Revolutionary Snake Ensemble's 2<sup>nd</sup> release, *Forked Tongue*, is their first release on Cuneiform. In the New Orleans brass band tradition, *Forked Tongue* opens with a New Orleans' funeral dirge, "Just a Closer Walk", before exploring more upbeat fare. Containing a total of 12 tunes, the disc showcases a wide range of the Snakes' repertoire. It includes unique arrangements of traditional New Orleans marching music and spirituals and of music by such diverse songwriters as **William Broad** (aka **Billy Idol**), **Ornette Coleman** (this may be the first disc ever to feature both Idol and Coleman!), **Norman Span**, and **Jay Livingston & Ray Evans**, as well as original material by Field. The album features Field on alto sax, whistles and percussion; **Andrew Hickman** on tenor saxophone, **Jon Fraser** on trumpet, **Lennie Peterson** on trombone, **Kimon Kirk** on acoustic bass, and on drums and percussion, both **Erik Paull** and **Phil Neighbors** (who also contributes electric bass). Guest musicians include vocalist **Gabrielle Agachicko** performing Field's stunning minor key arrangement of the traditional classic "Down By the Riverside." Other guests include **Karen Aqua** (djembe, tambourine), **Andy Pinkham** (electric bass), and **Jesse Williams** (bass). Recorded in 2006 at Boston's **Mortal Music Studios** with engineer/owner **Andy Pinkham**, it was remixed by Minneapolis' **Balanced Productions** and mastered in Los Angeles by **Bob Demaa**.

In support of *Forked Tongue*, the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble will perform more than a dozen shows in New England during the spring and summer of 2008, including Drom (NYC), Dynamic Grooves World Music Festival (CT), Ryles Jazz Club (Boston), the Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston), Tufts University, and the Providence (RI) Sound Session parade. Interviews to promote the release of the disc are confirmed for WNYC (NY) and WGBH (Boston).

For more information, please see:

[www.RevolutionarySnakeEnsemble.org](http://www.RevolutionarySnakeEnsemble.org)

[myspace.com/revolutionarvsnaakeensemble](http://myspace.com/revolutionarvsnaakeensemble)

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#### SELECTED QUOTES ON REVOLUTIONARY SNAKE ENSEMBLE'S PREVIOUS ALBUM:

*"They've pretty much modernized the traditional concept, and they've spun it into a singular sound that's very unique and very vibrant. They accelerated the norm. They went past the tried and true. They managed to do it all with a very distinct musical persona."*

– Glenn Astarita on NPR's *Morning Edition*

*"Captures the abandon of a street parade while expanding its stylistic scope ... it's got the essential ingredients spiced with fresh flavors."*

– Dan Ouellette

*"Urban tribal music that blends an audacious New Orleans brass band spirit with the sensual fever of African and Latin rhythms."*

– *The Boston Herald*

*"Great music!"* – James Cervantes, *KWVA, Eugene, Oregon*

*"Year of the Snake is killer!"* – Clay Gaunce, *WRFL, Lexington, Kentucky*

*"Musical innovator Ken Field... [drags] the brass band into the 21st century."* – Seth Rogovoy, *Berkshire Eagle*

*"GREAT new CD - a terrific disc! A fabulous Mardi Gras-themed album of horn-heavy, funky, and energetic party music." TOP 10 PICK FOR THE YEAR!"*

– John Schaefer, Music Dir. & New Sounds host, *WNYC, New York City*

*"Imagine a New Orleans brass band coupled to JB horns and firing off just enough improvisation to keep things unpredictable. Things have certainly heated up in Boston!"* – Nils Jacobson, *All About Jazz*, [www.allaboutjazz.com](http://www.allaboutjazz.com)

*"The CD is amazing"* – Dan Bodah, *WFMU Radio*

*"One of the best unsigned bands in the country - the best party in town!"* – *WBZ-TV Channel 4*

*"It's all here - music for the head, the heart, and the feet."* – Scott Billington, two-time Grammy-winning New Orleans music producer

*"Great work - making quite a buzz around here!"* – David Eisenman, Jazz & Blues Director, *WTJU FM, Charlottesville, VA*

*"TOP 10 PICK FOR THE YEAR!"* – Glenn Astarita, *New Orleans Gambit Weekly*

*"One serious party album - an instrumental record infectious enough to keep the bodily juices bubbling, and interesting enough to keep the noggin engaged, as well."*

– Charles Winokoor, *Taunton Daily Gazette*

*"Simply put, this is one of the most successful combinations of booty-shaking & brain-stimulating music to be released this year, and it deserves your attention post-haste."*

– Brett McCallon, *Splendid Magazine*

*"FOUR STARS!"* – Maurizio Comandini, *All About Jazz Italy*

*"Boston's own rabble of horn players and drummers bring a positively Sun Ra shine to second-line music"*

– Jed Gottlieb, *The Boston Herald*

## **WHAT THE PRESS HAS SAID ABOUT REVOLUTIONARY SNAKE ENSEMBLE:**

### **FEATURES:**

"Ken Field... has fed his inner party monster via another group, the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble. Clad in colorful headdresses and outfits patterned in leopard and zebra, layers of beads dangling from their necks, they've made occasional appearances at clubs and theaters, or they could be found marching down the middle of Massachusetts Avenue during the summertime Cambridge World's Fair blowing horns and beating drums. Their exuberant tunes draw on the New Orleans brass-band and Mardi Gras parade traditions ...

...the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble's debut album, *Year of the Snake* (Innova), tightropes between giddy Crescent City intoxication and Yankee musician's ingenuity. ...

"I was trying to put together a party-worthy CD that also has musical legitimacy," Field says about *Year of the Snake*. "I didn't want it to be just a bar-band thing. ... Initially we were playing a lot of 'out' improv stuff, but as the band developed, my interest in New Orleans brass band and Mardi Gras music developed." And indeed, in terms of what's usually heard in the old French Quarter during street parades, the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble are revolutionary. Nonetheless, Field's outfit has gotten a warm reception in New Orleans, including radio play and a place in *Gambit* magazine's list of the top albums of 2003." – Ted Drozdowski, "Second helpings..." *The Boston Phoenix*, January 16 - 22, 2004, www.bostonphoenix.com

"...the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble...sure do know how to have some fun. ...

RSE may operate from the traditions of New Orleans music, but the boundaries are pushed wide open when they actually play. "We mostly play from 'head' charts, where everyone has the melody and chord changes in front of them. Since there's no guitar or keyboard, the horns can not only solo, they can also come up with backing lines, or do group soloing, and even alter the harmonies spontaneously," Field said. "So there's a lot of improvisation. I also conduct some of the arrangements live, directing instruments to drop out, or play lines, etc. All the players are great at listening and doing the right thing at the right time." Having a band that can follow conceptions and charts and build into these great song forms means you've got a good core of people at work. Doing all of the high art ministrations of improvisation and having an audible party at the same time really is the best of both worlds.

February 24th will find Field in New Orleans for Mardi Gras celebrations where he'll be playing at a club in Slidell, just over the Lake from New Orleans. "I've been lucky to have made lots of friends down there over the years," Field said, "and I even spent a few years working with a New Orleans theater company providing music for a few of their productions. They hooked me up with Delfeayo Marsalis, and I had the great opportunity to play a duo performance/workshop with him at a youth corrections facility a few years back." Revolutionary Snake Ensemble won't be at Mardi Gras, but will be playing twice during the week after...

If a fun night of funky horn-driven mayhem seems to be your cup of tea (or more appropriately pitcher of Hurricanes with extra 151), Revolutionary Snake Ensemble is just the band to inspire your feet and stimulate your brain."

– Jeff Breeze, "Revolutionary Snake Ensemble: Horns Aplenty", *Performer Magazine*, February 2004

### **From a March 2006 Ken Field interview with John Schaefer, host of WNYC's Soundcheck, following the Snake Ensemble's first post-Katrina visit to New Orleans:**

JS: "So we hear, Ken, about the jazz funeral tradition of New Orleans. Was there any of that kind of vibe happening, any of that feeling of dancing and celebration in the face of great tragedy?"

KF: "Yeah, I think that that's what I came away from the whole trip feeling, that this was an example, really, of a jazz funeral, and in the jazz funeral there's opportunity to be somber and to recognize a loss, and when you're done with that, there's a celebration. There's a second line of partying and playing up-tempo music, and this is where the brass bands have been involved so much. And I really got the feeling that there has been, you know, six months of sadness and of hard work and of loss, and this was the second line. This party, this Mardi Gras, was a very important celebration - a time to realize the joyousness of life and of the unique culture of New Orleans, and it was really great to be part of that."

### **LIVE REVIEWS:**

"August 25th was a beautiful summer night for a concert in the Museum of Fine Arts' Calderwood Courtyard. Had the performance been indoors, however, the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble would have brought down the house. With their colorful costumes and brassy, in-your-face musical attitude that more than conjures up the sights and sounds of New Orleans during Mardi Gras, this group puts on a musical spectacular that simply must be heard to be believed. Led by Ken Field on alto saxophone, and joined by the 18-year-old trombone phenomenon Troy "Trombone Shorty" Andrews of New Orleans, the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble rocked the Courtyard for nearly two hours and left the audience wanting more.

The ensemble approached the stage with the traditional hymn "Just a Closer Walk with Thee." Except for the costumes, their style of entry was akin to that of a New Orleans funeral procession; the only items missing were black suits and a casket. The dirge-like feel was immediately abandoned once the band reached the stage and segued into a crowd-pleasing performance... Each member of the Ensemble possesses the remarkable ability to tie what he is doing improvisationally with what his fellow band members are doing, which creates an incredibly thick musical texture yet always makes perfect musical sense. The players ... move effortlessly between solo and ensemble playing, clearly enjoying themselves all the while. ...

While the work's primary venue is one inhabited by children, the work itself is a rhythmically challenging, melodically intricate and - as performed by the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble - entirely satisfying, as was the performance as a whole."

– Katie DeBonville, "Revolutionary Snake Ensemble with Troy "Trombone Shorty," *Performer Magazine*, Nov. 2004

"The Revolutionary Snake Ensemble like to turn their every appearance into an event, which makes them a gift to the local scene. For their appearance at the Museum of Fine Arts' Concerts in the Courtyard series last Wednesday night, they added a second drummer and second bassist and imported the 18-year-old New Orleans phenomenon Troy "Trombone Shorty" Andrews. In their first set Wednesday night, they provided the right mix of party-hearty atmosphere and inventive arrangements and playing.

... The New Orleans second-line parade rhythm is the spine of the RSE's music, but so are the aesthetic of collective improvisation, a broad repertoire, and the wild strain of the avant-garde. So "A Closer Walk with Thee" led to John Scofield's "Some Nerve" and then Sun Ra's "A Call for All Demons." The latter provided the first thrill of the night: RSE's trombonist Lenny Peterson built up a hard-riffing solo, Andrews started blowing long, vibrato-laden tones behind him, and the rest of the band began to join in. There was great, propulsive riffing, too...

The band also made one of those perfect turnaround gestures on "Soul Power," with the rhythm section dropping out for some massed polyphony from the horns, then kicking in perfectly on the downbeat. They gave the right Latin licks to the standard "Goin' Back to New Orleans," delivered Ornette Coleman's "Guadaloupe" with a cumbia bomp, and marched off for intermission to "Little Liza Jane." ..."

– "September 3 - 9, 2004: THE REVOLUTIONARY SNAKE ENSEMBLE: Demonology", *The Boston Phoenix*, 9/15/2004