



Bio information: **REVOLUTIONARY SNAKE ENSEMBLE**

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REVOLUTIONARY SNAKE ENSEMBLE
Delivers Another Blast of Brass-Powered Jazz, Funk
and New Orleans Street Rhythms with the Blazing Live Album
SERPENTINE

The ouroboros, a serpent swallowing its own tail, is an ancient symbol of infinity and the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth. The omnivorous **Revolutionary Snake Ensemble** isn't quite eternal, but the brass-powered Boston combo devours and reinvents a panoply of irresistible grooves, and with *Serpentine* the sextet is poised to gracefully undulate into its fifth decade. RSE's fifth album is a joyously uproarious live session recorded in 2024 at the Regattabar as part of the group's 35th anniversary run.

Led by inveterately inventive alto saxophonist, flutist, and composer **Ken Field**, the RSE is a musical insurrection with enviable longevity. As *NYC Jazz Record* noted, the group has earned a devoted following with "its unique and somewhat twisted twist on the New Orleans brass band tradition...hard-partying avant-funk, with boisterous soloing." Almost a decade after the release of the band's last album, 2016's critically hailed *I Want That Sound!*, the group boasts the same potent line up, with **Dave Harris** on trombone and tuba, tenor saxophonist **Tom Hall**, bassist **Blake Newman**, trumpeter **Jerry Sabatini**, and drummer **Phil Neighbors**, "whom I've been playing with the longest - he's an amazing drummer," Field says.

"The concept of not having a chording instrument in the band allows for tremendous freedom on the part of the horn players. The arrangements are usually spontaneous, decided by me on stage based on the group vibe and on my vibe at the moment!"

Spirits were obviously high at the Regattabar, one of the Boston area's leading jazz venues. The RSE sounds loose and limber, delivering one thrilling piece after another, enviably undaunted by the prospect of making a new album with Field changing up arrangements on the spot. "I told the guys, 'Don't worry about the fact that we're recording,'" Field says. "'Don't hold back. Take chances.' Jazz is an experimental form. If you do the same thing every night you're not doing jazz right, in my opinion."

For longtime fans of the RSE, *Serpentine* is a welcome dispatch from the frontiers of New Orleans-inspired funk, and for newcomers it's an invitation to expand your rhythmic consciousness. As New Orleans Jazz Museum curator and longtime WWOZ host of "Freaknologist Lunatique" David Kunian declared, "All hail the mighty Revolutionary Snake Ensemble. They have blessed us with another great record of jazz that you have to dance to, but without losing the complexity and sophistication of the music itself. There's some Sun Ra, some New Orleans second line, some Afrobeat, some Zappa, and other mystical ingredients that combine into a musical spell that will envelop the listener. This is jazz for young and old and new and veteran."

The album opens with "The Skunk is D'Funk'd," a furiously grooving piece that Field originally conceived for the Good Trouble Brass Band, a politically-charged community combo that has provided an incendiary soundtrack for Boston-area protests since the 1980s. At a Martha's Vineyard gathering the group encountered

“a skunk that was defunct,” which Field says inspired the tune’s particularly potent funk. “We also do this with an 80-100 person pick-up band I lead in Australia at the HONK!Oz Festival” he says. “It works really well with a large group and also scales down. I like writing material that’s simple in terms of construction, with two or three sections, bass and melody lines, and not a lot of chord changes. Both less is more and more is more.”

This seemingly contradictory aesthetic makes perfect sense in the RSE, which provides elemental pleasures via dance-inspired syncopation. In the case of “Buck,” Field rides the serpent into Balkan territory, a satisfying detour for the Crescent City-steeped band. The reverent arrangement of the folk song “The Water is Wide” serves as a balladic deep breath, with a hymn-like rendition featuring a series of striking solos by Sabatini and Harris. From the beatific to the boisterous, Field revamped his solo sax piece “Berrendo” for the group as “Berrendo Road,” complete with capricious melody and bounding bass line delivered with Newman’s typical agility.

While “Berrendo” was originally created during a residency in a subterranean space, “Strange Cults” plumbs the depths of human experience with a descending melodic line that Field wrote back in the 1970s when Rev. Jim Jones and the People’s Temple were in the news. Which isn’t to say he gravitates to human folly. With “Nezalezhnist” (the Ukrainian word for independence), Field wrote a minor-key anthem that evokes the strength and fortitude of a people fighting for survival. And with an affectionate cover of Frank Zappa’s “Son of Mr. Green Genes” (from the 1969 album *Hot Rats*), the RSE soars through a very different kind of fanfare, grandiose, witty, and ready to rumble, with a beautifully authoritative, wide ranging, and exploratory solo from Hall on tenor sax.

“Present” is a quintessential Field piece, with graceful harmonic motion defined by lapidary lines, and beautifully calibrated interlocking parts. His solo is a master class in maintaining intensity with supple dynamics and slippery phrasing. He displays his command of the flute on “Xonk,” a minimalist tour de force co-written with the Hungry March Band’s Jason Chandler. The album closes with a second-line setting of James Cleveland’s gospel standard “Never Grow Old,” a respectful hat tip “in recognition of where the band is coming from,” Field says. “We’re still focused on New Orleans second-line music. It’s a triumvirate of elements, New Orleans, free improvisation, and funk.”

Born January 26, 1953 in Red Bank, New Jersey, Field grew up next door to a club frequented by Bruce Springsteen in his early days with the trio Earth (he didn’t find out about his hometown’s most famous native son, William “Count” Basie, until much later). Starting on clarinet at 10, he made quick progress, playing in marching band and orchestra, and put in some extracurricular time on tenor sax in a high school rock band. An accident his freshman year at Brown University knocked out his front tooth, which brought his clarinet playing to an immediate end. Turning his attention to the flute, Field started to teach himself to improvise while managing the Providence folk/blues venue Big Mother Coffee House. While studying applied mathematics, he fell in with some local musicians who introduced him to innovators like Coltrane, McCoy Tyner, Weather Report, and Frank Zappa. “I started jamming with them on flute, and it was a whole educational thing for me, being exposed to all this great music,” Field says.

Working as a computer programmer, he turned his attention to the alto sax, and started commuting to Boston to study with legendary teacher Joe Viola. Eventually he took time off from his day job to attend Berklee from 1977-79, which led to his move to Boston. He spent several years playing with the psychedelic funk band Skin, and ended up replacing saxophonist Steve Adams (who was moving to the Bay Area to join ROVA Saxophone Quartet) in Birdsongs of Mesozoic, a new music/chamber rock ensemble that spun off from the storied band Mission of Burma.

“That was a transformative experience,” Field says. “Birdsongs is an avant rock band that’s compositionally based. I learned a lot from all those guys, pushing all kinds of musical limits.”

Field continues as a member of Birdsongs, while also maintaining a busy solo career as a player and composer with a half dozen solo releases, including *Subterranea* (O.O.Discs), *Pictures of Motion* (sFz), *Tokyo in F* (Sublingual), *Under the Skin* (Innova), *Iridescence* (Ravello Records), and *Transmitter* (Neuma Recordings). Field has written scores for animation, film, modern dance, and television, including music for *Sesame Street*. But it's in the RSE that he truly lets his freak flag fly. Decked out in feathered and metallic finery that evokes Sun Ra's Arkestra as much as the Mardi Gras Indians, the RSE has always honored the essential role of New Orleans brass bands in providing succor and uplift to mourners accompanying loved ones for burial (while also fulfilling the celebratory imperative for the promenade back from the cemetery). He founded the group in 1990 when he assembled an improvisational horn and percussion group with trumpeter and cartoonist Scott Getchell for a pagan women's ritual celebration. The response was so positive that he decided to continue the project as a vehicle for the region's skilled free improv set. But as Getchell moved on to other projects, Field gradually developed a book featuring his originals and rarely played tunes by John Scofield, Sun Ra, and Ornette Coleman set to New Orleans street grooves.

Part workshop and part improvisors' clinic, the band attracted a revolving cast of players. "The material was very improvisational and the arrangements tended to be spontaneous," Field says. "I'd direct on the spot, which started as a very stressful role. Over time I learned a lot about how to do that and it's still the way the band works." The result was a moveable music feast from which everyone wanted to partake. "The late NOLA sax player Charles Neville joined us for a number of years for our annual Mardi Gras concert, as did the late NOLA sax player Amadee Castenell," Field notes. "Drummer Kenny Wollesen and sax player Matt Darriau played with us in New York City when some of my band members couldn't make the trip from Boston due to a snowstorm, and they ended up on *Live Snakes*, along with New York trombonist Josh Roseman. Trumpeter Jason Palmer, sax player Godwin Louis, and drummer Brian Richburg Jr. have guested with us at various times. And Troy "Trombone Shorty" Andrews was our guest soloist at a performance at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts."

The regular Snake ranks have been equally formidable. Over the years, the RSE has featured a host of stellar musicians, including saxophonists Russ Gershon (Either/Orchestra), Dana Colley (Morphine), Charlie Kohlhasse (John Tchicai/Leroy Jenkins/Anthony Braxton), Noah Preminger, and Gregory Groover Jr., bassists Jesse Williams (Al Kooper/Duke Robillard), Kimon Kirk (Aimee Mann, Session Americana), and Jim Prescott (G Love & Special Sauce), trumpeter Scott Getchell (Lars Vegas, Skull Session), trombonists Scott Flynn, Bob Pilkington (Chandler Travis Philharmonic) and the late Danny Heath, percussionist Ken Winokur (Alloy Orchestra), and drummers Eric Paull (DJ Logic, Clem Snide), Lee Fish, Matt Williams, and the late Stanley Swann.

The band's acclaimed debut album, 2003's *Year of the Snake* (Innova Recordings), brought national attention. The following year the RSE began playing regularly at Mardi Gras in New Orleans, a sojourn made possible by a singular arrangement with Amtrak's Crescent train in which the band performing their music en route. On arrival, the Snake Ensemble regularly marched with the all-women Krewe of Muses, an experience that "legitimized the band to me," Field says.

"We would get down there, play a little party, and people assumed we were from New Orleans, and that meant a lot to us. At the same time, we were doing something different. It gave us the experience of meeting and playing with some New Orleans musicians, and they always encouraged us to keep doing our own thing."

With its second album, 2008's *Forked Tongue* (Cuneiform), the RSE continued to expand its already far-flung repertoire, ranging from hymns and spirituals to traditional New Orleans parade anthems and tunes by everyone from Billy Idol to Ornette Coleman. The group first unleashed its fierce concert energy on 2014's *Live Snakes*. *Serpentine* marks yet another shedding of skin, offering a further glimpse into the RSE's improvisational brio and gritty splendor.