

SHAPESHIFTER LAB IS MORE THAN A MUSIC VENUE

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By Leila Darabi

The Coop is getting a new neighbor. Across the street at 837 Union St., in the space once occupied by the Tea Lounge, the performance venue and music nonprofit ShapeShifter Lab will open later this year. The two-story complex will house a cafe and performance space on the ground floor, as well as an upstairs workshop area and offices in what was last used as a yoga studio.

THE ORIGIN STORY

ShapeShifter Lab's co-founders, Matthew Garrison and Fortuna Sung (both Coop members, Garrison for more than 20 years), first met at an international high school in Rome in the 1980s. They came from artistic families that had relocated to Italy: Garrison's father played bass with John Coltrane, and his modern dancer mother taught

and choreographed; Sung's father produced and directed films in Hong Kong, and her actor mother worked with Bruce Lee.

After high school, Garrison went on to study at the Berklee College of Music and began touring as an electric bass player. Sung went to college in San Francisco and returned to her native Hong Kong. The friends lost touch until 2010, when they reconnected on Facebook and later met up in Tokyo while Garrison performed as part of Whitney Houston's band.

"I was working in Hong Kong and looking for what to do next," Sung said. "Hong Kong didn't have many opportunities for artists." She wanted to apply her business skills to something creative and independent. "I was done working for other people."

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SHAPESHIFTER CO-FOUNDER MATTHEW GARRISON

Garrison, meanwhile, had put down roots in Brooklyn while traveling as a sought-after touring musician. He played with jazz greats including Herbie Hancock, Steve Coleman and John McLaughlin and, in addition to Whitney Houston, popular artists ranging from Paul Simon to Joni Mitchell. In Brooklyn, he founded a record label and put out several records, the second of which he titled *ShapeShifter* in reference to his genre-crossing musical interests.

During a visit in Brooklyn, he and Sung decided to join forces to create an experimental musical startup that would provide artists not only with a space to perform but a platform to promote their work.

“For us to start up a music-type business made sense. It was easy, given all the people we knew,” Garrison said. Explaining the full range of the business plan proved slightly harder, given the pair’s wide-ranging interests and passions. “It was hard to get people to understand what we were trying to do in that first phase,” Garrison said. “People kept asking, ‘Is it a studio?’”

For Garrison and Sung, ShapeShifter goes beyond performance space and recording studio, though they offer both. “It’s for you to perform and present your art, and we will make sure to facilitate that,” Garrison clarified. Eventually the concept caught on, and crowds wrapped around the block of their former venue near the Gowanus Whole Foods. “It kind of blew up all of a sudden, and almost every musician in New York came through.”

As a musician, Garrison believes strongly in ShapeShifter supporting musical artists beyond a single performance. “We discourage musicians from coming to our space to play a ‘gig.’ We want you to come to present an event, to present your work. And we’re going to be there to facilitate that as much as humanly possible.”



Matt Garrison and Fortuna Sung in the new location of their music venue, Shapeshifter Lab, across from the Food Coop on Union Street.

NOT A VENUE, BUT A COMPLEX

Today, the ShapeShifter multiverse includes ShapeShifter Lab, the music venue; ShapeShifter+, a nonprofit entity; and ShapeShifter Lab Productions, a music label.

Garrison and Sung registered ShapeShifter+ in 2014 but didn't start nonprofit programs until they were forced to shut down their in-person events in March 2020. Having operated out of a space in Gowanus for several years, they found themselves in the middle of a pandemic saddled with a competitive Brooklyn rent and no revenue from ticket sales. "We just couldn't keep pulling out of our own pockets. It became completely unsustainable," Garrison said.

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SHAPESHIFTER CO-FOUNDER FORTUNA SUNG

The nonprofit model provided tax incentives for investors. With the new venue in Park Slope, they intend to fundraise to offset performance prices with the goal of making entertainment more accessible to people of all economic backgrounds. “New York City concert prices are very expensive. It’s unreal. We’re hoping [the nonprofit] helps us make that easier for everyone,” Sung explained. “Having a nonprofit helps for future fundraising,” she added.

ShapeShifter+ also collaborates with other nonprofits. Garrison serves as a mentor to young musicians through community programs. In addition, when the space opens in a few months, they will offer a home to the Fat Cats, a youth ensemble organized by the Afro Latin Jazz Alliance (ALJA). Fat Cats’ Sunday workshops and rehearsals will be open to the public on the ground floor.

Sung, the operations and logistics lead, has designed a café space for the ground floor and plans to include yoga in the programming for the upstairs workshop space. She herself attended yoga at the studio that shut down during the pandemic, which was part of the appeal of this site for the new incarnation of ShapeShifter Lab. She and Garrison both liked the former Tea Lounge space, but didn’t think their concept would work on the ground floor with another business just above it.

“I almost gave up the idea of the space, because the upper space was occupied,” she recounted. When businesses began to reopen after pandemic shutdowns, Sung sought out her former yoga studio but saw it had shut down. While she missed the classes, she saw an opportunity in the building.

A DIGITAL LAB

Beyond the walls of the Union Street venue, Garrison and Sung plan robust digital programming. They had already invested in the latest live streaming functionality at their original venue, and those live streaming skills came in handy during the pandemic.

Garrison has also spent considerable time learning to code and has created two iOS apps. His first, the self-titled Matt Garrison app, allows him to release his own music on his own terms as well as share lessons and chord charts. He hopes to expand the technology to support other musicians in taking the same innovative approach to releasing new work.

Garrison gained skills in app design from his friend and fellow bass player Massimo Biolcati. He first asked Biolcati to build him an app. When his friend declined, Garrison proposed he teach him how to do it himself instead. “Because we’re bass players, we would get together, play bass and then we would code,” he said, laughing.

ACCORDING TO GARRISON, THEIR LANDLORDS, THE DIXONS, TURNED DOWN OTHER OFFERS FOR THE SPACE, INCLUDING A BID FROM SHAKE SHACK. “COULD YOU IMAGINE A SHAKE SHACK ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE COOP?”

Garrison—and ShapeShifter Labs’—latest project, TuneBend, takes his vision to the next level. “It’s basically the app that allows anyone to collaborate and build pieces of music together,” Garrison said. He received support from Apple’s Racial Justice and Equity Initiative to create it.

“I can’t even explain how much they’ve done for us. Not monetarily, just in terms of pushing a message, connecting us with their engineers, helping us make decisions on how to build the software. Just really serious stuff—and it’s not over.”



Matt Garrison

SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

Both Garrison and Sung have effusive praise for their new landlords, the Dixon family. Proprietors of Dixon's Bike Shop, a few doors down from the Coop, and owners of property around the neighborhood, the Dixon family originally hail from Jamaica. Marie Dixon, the family's matriarch, is a long-time Coop member.

Garrison, whose parents are Black and Jewish, and Sung, whose family is Chinese, expressed special gratitude for the trust bestowed to them by a Black-owned business in taking them on as tenants. According to Garrison, the Dixons turned down other offers for the space, including a bid from Shake Shack. "Could you imagine a Shake Shack across the street from the Coop?"

Instead of fast food, they will offer healthy food options at their café, which Sung

plans to keep open for business during regular hours and not just while performances take place. Coop member and veteran caterer Kim Pistone is advising on the menu.

ShapeShifter Lab will open as soon as the Department of Buildings permits clear, Sung said. Coop members can expect updates in future *Linewaiters' Gazette* articles, and Sung hopes to provide a venue for Coop events once open.

Leila Darabi joined the Gazette as a reporter in 2016. She is the cohost of the podcast Cringewatchers and shares photos of the things she cooks with Coop ingredients @persian_ish on Instagram.