

SHAPESHIFTER LAB CELEBRATES ONE YEAR IN PARK SLOPE

September 24, 2024



Photographs by Caroline Mardok

By Leila Darabi

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August marked one year since the music and arts organization ShapeShifter Lab moved into 837 Union Street, just across the street from the Park Slope Food Coop. Before it opened last year, founders and Coop members Matthew Garrison and Fortuna Sung shared their ambitious plans for the space with the *Linewaiters' Gazette*. They had built the ShapeShifter name as a jazz venue in Gowanus. With the new venue, they wanted to continue that work and to expand their nonprofit entity ShapeShifter+. One year since they opened their doors, the space is fully open as a music venue, part-time cafe and studio space.

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MUSIC VENUE

True to its roots, the new ShapeShifter Lab is most active as a music venue, hosting performances from renowned jazz artists. August performances included Bill Ware & The Club Bird All Stars performing original compositions from Ware, a popup show featuring DJs from the HELM record collective, clarinetist Ricardo Gallo's project Horse's Mouth, jazz ensemble Joshua Trio Two, pianist Shereen Cheong's group, an Afrobeat-/Afrofusion night and the Indian raga group Mir Naqibul Islam Trio.



Shereen Cheong Muthuraja on keys, Andrew Cheng on guitar, Anthony Muthuraja on drums, Ruber Simbana on percussion and Matt Garrison on

bass.



Matt Garrison on bass and Ruber Simbana on percussion at ShapeShifter Lab

“Honestly, the summer was kind of slow, but it gave us an idea of how to navigate summer in Park Slope,” Sung said. ShapeShifter Lab, which has a diversified business model, has seen other successes in its first year.

The space is also available to rent for events, a core part of the ShapeShifter Lab business model, Sung noted.

WORKSHOPS AND CLASSES

The summer gave the team the opportunity to build out programming on their second-floor studio space. Once a yoga studio, ShapeShifter Lab uses the second floor to host a range of classes and to record music.

Stefania Clementi, founder of Allora Creative Cultural Center, used the space to host kids classes this summer, which included cooking classes, play time and other activities as part of a day camp. The classes will continue into the fall as after-school activities.

“We also have SIM, the School for Improvisational Music,” said Sung. “It’s really fun, a whole day of improv starting with learning and including a teacher’s performance.” Those instructors included well-known jazz artists, directed by trumpeter Ralph Alessi, leading 15–20 students.

“The last day was their final performance,” Sung said. “It was quite amazing. People flew in from Switzerland and China for this workshop.”

BEYOND CAMPS AND MUSICAL PERFORMANCES, THE SHAPESHIFTER LAB TEAM IS EAGER TO RESUME YOGA CLASSES AND OTHER MOVEMENT ARTS PROGRAMS IN THEIR SECOND-FLOOR STUDIO.

As described on the school's website: "The SIM experience encompasses ample playing opportunities and discussion of improvisational concepts. SIM is less about teaching through the lens of style and more about the overarching concepts of improvisation, touching on multiple disciplines."

MOVEMENT ARTS

SHAPE SHIFTER +
MOVEMENT ARTS PROGRAM
UPCOMING CLASSES

• FUNDAMENTALS OF
IYENGAR
TUESDAYS
9:30-11AM

• DIVING DEEPER •
(YOGA)
SUNDAYS
9:30-12PM

• YOGA & MUSIC
MEDITATION •
FRIDAYS
5:00-6:30
(PM)

• CARNIVAL MOVES
& MELODIES
FRIDAYS
4-5 PM
(AGES 8-12)

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Beyond camps and musical performances, the ShapeShifter Lab team is eager to resume yoga classes and other movement arts programs in their second-floor studio. A recent newsletter had a teaser about a new “movement arts program” curated by Maia Claire Garrison, sister of ShapeShifter Lab’s co-founder Matthew Garrison.

Like her brother, Maia Claire Garrison was raised between New York and Rome. Their father, Jimmy Garrison, was the bassist in the John Coltrane Quartet and their mother, Roberta Escamilla Garrison, was a dancer and dance instructor. The music arts program is set to include classes in yoga, music meditation, capoeira and children’s classes in “carnival moves and melodies” and “clapping hands, stomping feet.”

THE CAFE

Long-time residents of Park Slope will remember that 837 Union once housed the famous Tea Lounge. So opening a cafe in the ShapeShifter space was always important to cofounders Garrison and Sung.

A part-time team of baristas now serve coffee, tea and a limited menu of treats. “If you remember the Tea Lounge, it’s a different kind of vibe,” Sung said. “I always tell the baristas ‘don’t get too disappointed if you don’t serve too much coffee’.” She describes the cafe as more of a networking space linked to the musical performances and community gatherings that ShapeShifter Lab hosts.

SHAPESHIFTER+ IS WORKING CLOSELY WITH JOHN COLTRANE’S SON RAVI COLTRANE AND THE COLTRANE HOME FOUNDATION TO HOST SOME OF THE COLTRANE CENTENNIAL CELEBRATIONS.

“We also have the Park Slope Parents’ Meetup. It’s really about networking and people coming in,” Sung said.

In particular, Sung previewed that ShapeShifter+ is working closely with John Coltrane's son Ravi Coltrane and the Coltrane Home Foundation to host some of the Coltrane centennial celebrations that, in 2026, will honor what would have been the musician's 100th birthday.

As the sons of two members of the Coltrane Quartet, Ravi Coltrane and Matthew Garrison are frequent collaborators. "They have continued the tradition of working together," Sung said.

A LAB TO MAKE CREATIVE PROJECTS HAPPEN

Sung describes ShapeShifter Lab as a space where artists can propose projects and get support in producing them. As an example of the unique, interdisciplinary nature of their events, she recounted a panel commemorating "the year of Alice Coltrane", John Coltrane's wife, mother to Ravi and bandleader and composer in her own right. The panel included Matthew Garrison, Reggie Workman (who was Coltrane's bassist before Matthew's father joined the quartet) and Ravi Coltrane. The three discussed and played Alice Coltrane's music.

RETURN OF THE PSFC CONCERT SERIES

Perhaps most exciting to Coop members, plans are in the works to revive the PSFC Concert Series, a long-standing performance series for Coop members. Jay Rodriguez, a Coop member and Grammy-nominated reed player, composer and bandleader, describes the tradition as: "One of the most exciting things we do at the Coop."

Coop member, artist and activist Beverly Grant formerly curated the series, and held it at the Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture. Rodriguez said he and Alexis Cuadrado—a Coop member who is a musician, producer and professor—took on the project of reviving the tradition. Together with Coop Membership Coordinator Jason Weiner, the team has worked to revive a beloved Coop tradition and found a new home at ShapeShifter Lab.

“WE HAVE SO MANY GIFTED AND TALENTED MEMBERS. IT WAS A NATURAL THING TO DO AND A NO-BRAINER,” SAID COOP MEMBER JAY RODRIGUEZ.

“Alexis Cuadrado and I were talking in the membership office about how we were missing community events, specifically the Very Good Coffeehouse,” Weiner shared. “Fortuna, Matt, Alexis and Jay connected. They created a great proposal for bringing the series back, and the General Coordinators approved the reboot. We’re super excited to bring more community-oriented events and fun back to Union Street!”

“We have so many gifted and talented members. It was a natural thing to do and a no-brainer,” Rodriguez shared in an email. “Before the shutdown this was an important ... way to bring us closer together as a community of people that really care about the world around us. Art in every aspect of our human experience is a life-healing force,” he said.

Rodriguez and Cuadrado intend to expand the new series beyond musical performances to include, Rodriguez said, “a platform for freedom of expression for all ... We welcome painters, dancers, professional and amateur musicians, comedians, actors, DJs, poets, magicians, gurus, dreamers and schemers who want to express themselves and share their gifts!”

They closed with a call to Coop members: “Bring us your light!”



Matt Garrison and Fortuna Sung, the founders and power team behind Shapeshifter Lab