

UNION STREET'S OTHER HALF-CENTURY-OLD COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

November 5, 2024



By Dan Bergsagel

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The Gardens of Union comprise two community gardens, two blocks down from the Coop on Union Street between 4th and 5th Avenues. The first, Annie's Garden at 640 Union, is a deep narrow lot squeezed between the high brick walls of two handsome brownstones and easily mistaken as a private space. It is quiet, ideal for sitting and contemplation.

The second, The Garden of Union at 636 Union, is a wide break in the streetscape, seemingly overgrown and a little wild behind a standard-gauge less-than-welcoming chain-link fence. It is a working garden, with an impressive composting infrastructure

and active vegetable beds.



These gardens are easy to walk past without a second glance, but their history is closely tied to the Coop's—in fact, they have been the destination for the Coop's compost program since its inception. Now in their 50th year, these humble community spaces tell a story of a changing neighborhood then and now.

The *Gazette* spoke with two active Gardens of Union members to understand more: Dan Joseph, a 58-year-old composer, technology consultant and current Coop member; and George Horner, a 72-year-old artist, gallerist and former Coop member who worked his last Coop shift as a cashier.



A GARDEN HISTORY

Annie's Garden was founded by Annie Thompsen in 1974. The garden sits on the former site of Unity Bakery, which was once part of a thriving commercial strip of grocers and funeral parlors. In the 1940s this stretch of Union Street had no street trees, and still had active trolley tracks running amongst cobbles until the line was closed in 1945.

In fact, Palo Santo, an incongruent restaurant slipped in among residential units in the lowest level of a brownstone at 652 Union Street, is a throwback to how the street previously looked.

"I met Annie in 1991 when I moved two blocks down from Annie's Garden," Horner recalled, "and she used to say that you could smell the bread being baked at Unity Bakers. You could give him your turkey or ham and he would cook it for you in his oven-

S.”



It was a local institution, but like many famous bakeries (the source of the 1666 Great Fire of London on Pudding Lane, I’m looking at you) it burned down. And much of the neighborhood was burnt out or boarded up. “Even in 2001 when I moved to the neighborhood there were some vacant buildings on this block. Burnt out or boarded up was typical in the 1970s,” explained Joseph. “It was a pretty depressed neighborhood.”

Thompson worked for the Democratic Party—its local headquarters was nearby—and was a politically active long-term resident. As the garden’s founding story goes, after the bakery burned down, Thompson saw it as another symbol of the neighborhood’s decline.

To arrest that decline, she used her community connections to found Annie’s Garden.

“She was sick of looking out of her windows into a pile of garbage and rats.” Horner

continued, “The city wasn’t doing anything about it and she intended it as a safe green space for the local children to explore, to teach the kids respect for earth and show them how to grow plants.”

The larger garden opened a few doors down in 1976 on the cleared grounds of two unstable five-story apartment buildings.

At the time these were rare community green spaces. Today there are a generous handful of other community gardens within the same three-block-wide, three-block--long rectangle—although the others are not as old and not as focused on vegetable production and gardening.



THE GARDENS AND THE COMMUNITY

The Park Slope Food Coop has longstanding ties to the gardens: laborers from the

fledgling Coop were said to have assisted in clearing the land for the establishment of the Gardens of Union, and early in the Garden's history, the Coop compost program started there.

The compost system has evolved over the decades and today is a well-organized, multibin ventilated system housed along the back wall of the Garden of Union, and staffed as part of the Coop's member-labor system. Many active members of the Gardens are also active members of the Coop.

In addition, the Coop will pay for the material needed to repair the compost bins. If a carpenter is needed, the Coop will give them a work credit. From a shared start in down-and-out Brooklyn, the organizational vibrancy and engagement trajectory of these two Union Street communities have diverged.



Instead of a membership like the Coop that boasts many thousands, the Gardens of Union membership is currently about 50 people.

“The neighborhood has become increasingly gentrified and expensive, and added to that disruption from the pandemic, the community aspect has frayed,” explained Joseph. “In its prime, we used to have an informational kiosk and monthly garden meetings, but today we are down to exactly one annual virtual meeting.”

Unlike the Coop, the gardens are not entirely independent—they are administered by the membership as part of the citywide Green Thumb program, and as such they have some mandated requirements “largely to protect the gardens from becoming private fiefdoms.”

They must be open to anyone, but not quite in the same way as a regular public park—there are risks to having a working garden with compost and tools and a pond open and unsupervised, so the Garden of Union is open for only a few scheduled hours a week, in addition to being open whenever a garden member is in attendance.

Annie’s Garden is more akin to a public park in terms of risks and uses and is operated as such—Horner, who lives two doors down, endeavors to open it every morning for most of the day.



PHOTO BY JOHN MIDGLEY

The membership rules at the garden are less rigorous than at the Coop. Any member can join the garden for \$25 each year and have all-round access to the garden, “although no one is turned away for lack of funds” assured the current copresident of the garden, Megan Saynisch.

About 10–15 members are designated “stewards,” who commit to a certain amount of volunteer work and can care for a growing bed in the garden. While there is no official requirement to volunteer a minimum amount, the membership can assist through gardening, sweeping the paths, or simply keeping the garden open.



AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY SPACE FOR THE FUTURE

The gardens host annual community dance events organized by Spoke the Hub, as well as the occasional open-air concert or wedding reception. Since the 1990s the gardens have been the distribution location for one of Brooklyn’s CSA programs. Rumor

has it that in the 2000s the members used to regularly picnic and BBQ in the space, too.

However, the membership is quieter today. The gardens are looking to further engage with the local community and increase its active membership.

“There is still a lot of misunderstanding about whether the garden is public or private, and we aren’t doing such a good job of being open and being accessible,” Joseph explained. This is corroborated by some local residents who live directly opposite the larger garden.

A neighbor, who asked to remain anonymous, said: “We’ve lived here on Union Street for five years now and have never been into the gardens. They are a little mysterious, and to be honest we have never felt welcomed.”







PHOTO BY JOHN MIDDLEY



Horner acknowledged that that is not an unusual view.

“I understand. Local neighbors who grew up in the area often feel that the garden is off limits now. But it just isn’t true.”

The garden team is working to change this closed perception. They are looking for more community partnerships—concerts, weddings, readings—and a new mural by Subway Doodle is in progress in Annie’s Garden.

The garden team are also hoping to reinforce the importance of gardens like these in their communities to help safeguard them from future changes in city administration.

“An active and informed membership is in the long-term interests of the garden,” said Joseph.

“Many developers would kill their own grandmother to get their hands on the site,” in-

terjected Horner. “The city might even turn around and annex the big garden to build something like affordable housing. A community who stands up for the garden can help prevent that.”

SHAPESHIFTER LAB CELEBRATES ONE YEAR IN PARK SLOPE

November 5, 2024



By Leila Darabi

September 24, 2024

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.

TRUE TO ITS ROOTS, THE NEW SHAPESHIFTER LAB IS MOST ACTIVE AS A MUSIC VENUE, HOSTING PERFORMANCES FROM RENOWNED JAZZ ARTISTS.

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

SHAPESHIFTER LAB IS MORE THAN A MUSIC VENUE

November 5, 2024



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."

"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."

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.

"NEW YORK CITY CONCERT PRICES ARE VERY EXPENSIVE. IT'S UNREAL. WE'RE HOPING [THE NONPROFIT] HELPS US MAKE THAT EASIER FOR EVERYONE."

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.