

Ken Field and the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble bring Mardi Gras to Scullers

By **Bill Beuttler** Globe correspondent, Updated February 14, 2024, 47 minutes ago



Ken Field (center right, with saxophone) and the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble play their Mardi Gras shows at Scullers on Saturday. JEAN HANGARTER

One might assume a face-to-face interview to be the obvious choice for checking in with [JazzBoston](#) president Ken Field about his Revolutionary Snake Ensemble

coming to Scullers on Saturday to celebrate Mardi Gras. But that overlooks the fact that Field, for nearly a decade now, has spent several weeks in Australia each winter leading Aussie musicians in festival performances.

“I’ve been coming to Australia for nine years,” explains Field, 71, via Zoom from down under early last week, clad in a Hawaiian shirt that, if sedate by Revolutionary Snake Ensemble regalia standards, retains a bit of arty insouciance and panache. “I bring in arrangements of my own music and some New Orleans stuff, some arrangements I’ve done of Australian pieces.”

At Scullers, he’ll focus on New Orleans stuff. Nearly all of the band’s lineup for the past several years will be on hand: Field on alto saxophone and flute, Tom Hall on tenor sax, Dave Harris on trombone and tuba, Blake Newman on bass, and Phil Neighbors on drums. Trumpeter Jerry Sabatini has a conflict so he will be absent, but the core band will be augmented by expatriated New Orleanians Henri Smith on vocals and Amadee Castenell on tenor sax and flute.

ADVERTISING



“I think to do a Mardi Gras celebration in Boston, it’s just so great to have some people representing the city directly,” says Field. “Henri used to emcee at Jazz Fest [the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival], is an amazing vocalist. Amadee has played with everybody — Allen Toussaint, etc. — and is just a great player and a wonderful guy.” (Those et ceteras include the likes of Elvis Costello, Fats Domino, the Neville Brothers, and Dr. John.)

Smith, who settled in Gloucester after being displaced by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, says he was introduced to Field by his late trombonist friend Danny Heath, and that one of the songs he’ll be singing Saturday is “That’s When I Know It’s Mardi Gras,” which he wrote with saxophonist Donald Harrison Jr. soon before leaving New Orleans. He likes the ensemble because “it’s electric, eclectic. [Field] studied a little bit with Charles Neville, and I was friends with Charles Neville.

“The band is just — they’re different, but they know New Orleans style.”

More avant-garde types admire the ensemble as well. When Field was assembling live recordings for the 2014 album “Live Snakes” at a handful of venues in New York and Cambridge, a snowstorm caused some of the band members to miss a New York gig. Filling in for them were drummer Kenny Wollesen, trombonist (and Newton native) Josh Roseman, and reedman Matt Darriau, best known for his work with the Klezmatics.

“Matt came away from the gig, and his little quote was ‘fun yet deep,’” recalls Field. “Which I think is the perfect way to describe the Snake Ensemble. It is fun, but there’s

some harmonic complexity. There's some melodic complexity. A little bit of rhythmic complexity — we kind of stay with pretty straight-ahead grooves, but sometimes not.”

That complexity crept into the ensemble's party music isn't surprising. Trombone Shorty and others have been modernizing the Mardi Gras-style brass bands in New Orleans, notes Field. And Field's own influences and interests can't help but stretch things for the Snake Ensemble.

Field hosts [“The New Edge,”](#) a weekly two-hour radio show on MIT's WMBR-FM covering new, mostly instrumental recordings from the realms of classical, jazz, and world music. He chairs the Truro Concert Committee in addition to overseeing JazzBoston, and formerly helped plan Somerville's Honk! Festival.

Since the late 1980s, Field has been a member of Birdsongs of the Mesozoic, an offshoot of the post-punk group Mission of Burma that bridges modern classical and rock. [On Thursday, he'll join pianist Dave Bryant](#) and others in playing harmolodic jazz at Harvard-Epworth United Methodist Church in Cambridge.

Two of his dance collaborations will be performed locally in coming months as well: On March 8, he'll be at Tufts University reprising his dance commission [“Under the Skin”](#) with Bridgman/Packer Dance, and April 13-14 he'll be at Boston University Dance Theater for three performances, debuting [“Under the Canopy”](#) with the choreographer and dancer Joanie Block, a work exploring loss that was inspired by the death of her husband, Sandy Block, in 2021.

Field suffered a similar loss in 2011 when his wife and frequent collaborator, filmmaker Karen Aqua, died of ovarian cancer at age 57. Contributing music to her animated films, including playful educational shorts for “Sesame Street,” led to his

layering saxophone parts on dance projects as well as to his own solo works.

Of the latter, his first, “Subterranea” (1996), was recorded in an underground space in Roswell, N.M., when Aqua had a residency in that city. His recent album, “Transmitter” (2021), was composed and performed by Field alone in a studio with his sax and looper machine — his response to the shutdown of live music during the COVID pandemic.

Some of the music Field created to accompany Aqua’s “Sesame Street” shorts made its way into the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble repertoire. “Parade,” for example, is the opening track of “Live Snakes” but was written for her [“Parade of Numbers.”](#)

It’s a fun, danceable piece, befitting a Mardi Gras party. But Field says the Scullers sets won’t entirely be about fun.

“We’re advertising it as a party, and it is a party,” he explains. “It’s great to play this kind of music and celebrate. People dance and have a great time. But there’s a lot going on in the world now. We can have a joyful celebration, but also a celebration that respects things that are not joyful in the world and reminds us that we still have a lot of work to do.

“That’s what happens at a New Orleans funeral,” he adds. “People are mournful on the way to the cemetery, and they’re celebratory on the way back.”

Field trusts Boston audiences to be similarly capable of balancing conflicting emotions.

Asked how that might play out onstage, he replies, “We take a piece like ‘Just a Closer Walk With Thee’ and play it slowly, then bring it uptempo. I mean, that’s a very

common way of presenting that kind of music. But we also have a couple of pieces that we're going to do that respect other parts of the world. People should be prepared for a wide-ranging emotional experience. It's a party, but it's not just a party."

REVOLUTIONARY SNAKE ENSEMBLE

At Scullers, 400 Soldiers Field Road. Feb. 17, 7 and 9 p.m. Tickets from \$35.

scullersjazz.com

Bill Beuttler can be reached at bill@billbeuttler.com.

[Show comments](#)

©2024 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC