

## Defying labels, Boston group brings eclectic sound to CSU

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Philosophy, not music, was Russ Gershon's first major in college. Which helps explain how, when founding a jazz ensemble in 1985, he arrived at the seemingly strange name Either/Orchestra.

The name is a pun on "Either/Or," a famously dense and thorny text by 19th-century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard.

Gershon selected the name not to allude to any specific issue addressed in the book, but to summarize the Boston-based orchestra's diverse, complex identity.

"I'm not sure we're a Kierkegaardian band, per se," Gershon, a saxophonist, says by phone from his office in Somerville, Mass. "But the thing about Kierkegaard is that he was a lot funnier than people realize.

"It's the same with us. Intelligent music does more than just sound good. It comes out of a great deal of history, ideas and cultural phenomena. People bring all sorts of perspectives to listening and we play on that."

Clevelanders planning to listen to Either/Orchestra on Wednesday at Cleveland State University can expect to encounter a cornucopia of ideas and cultures, a unique, globally influenced sound difficult to categorize succinctly.

"I've always thought they were a really unusual group," says Andrew Rindfleisch, a longtime friend of Gershon's and the head of CSU's composition department. "They're not exactly jazz but they're not exactly anything else, either. They're improvisational, but what they do is way more interesting than what you might assume."

The first clue to Either/Orchestra's individuality is its 10-piece instrumentation. Including Gershon, the band is made up of three saxophones, two trumpets, one trombone, piano, bass and two drummers. Players range in age from 28 to 58. They fall just short of a "big band" but they're definitely much more than a "combo."

"The idea," Gershon says, "is to be big enough to have an orchestral sound but also be small enough to be nimble like a small jazz group and feature each player as a soloist. All of our music is written custom for us, mostly by me, so if someone can't be there, the music has to be reconstructed."

Then there's the music itself, which observes not just one style but many simultaneously. Besides a big-band quality, it also contains elements of Latin and contemporary jazz, rock and Afro-Caribbean music.

The last few years, the music of pre-revolutionary Ethiopia has been a "big obsession," Gershon says. A friend introduced him to the genre and Either/Orchestra has continued exploring it. They now play at Ethiopian music festivals and collaborate with Ethiopian artists.

The fruits of their labor can be heard on discs produced through Gershon's own record label, Accurate Records. Some of this music will also turn up in their concert here.

"What we play are original arrangements of pre-existing songs, arrangements that translate the vocal lines into horn parts," Gershon explains. "It doesn't exactly fit neatly into the standard catalogs."

But their concert program Wednesday is unusual even for the members of Either/Orchestra. In addition to their "normal" material, they plan to premiere a new, as yet untitled work by Rindfleisch, who doesn't typically craft music in this vein. "He's written this great groove tune for us but it has a sophistication that could only come from a really skilled composer," Gershon says.

Either/Orchestra even plans to play music written specially for them months ago by CSU composition students. As excited as Rindfleisch is to dabble in jazz, he can hardly wait to give his proteges the same opportunity during a residency before to the concert.

"Young composers today don't necessarily have this distinction between jazz and classical music, and I wanted to give the students the chance to write for this kind of group. I'm trying to bring in as many fresh voices as possible and make this the most active contemporary music place there is around here."

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