

Music Museum of New England

BILLY NOVICK

Woodwind master Billy Novick plays clarinet, most of the saxophone family, and knows his way around a pennywhistle. Growing up in New York, he was given his first clarinet as a hand-me-down when his older brother moved on to bassoon. And though the young Novick was listening to all kinds of music on the radio, rock and blues contemporary jazz included, he really picked up on the stylings of Jellyroll Morton, Louis Armstrong, Johnny Dodds and Sidney Bechet. All of that when he was only about 14. By 16, he was getting paid to play clarinet, in a Blood, Sweat & Tears-type band at proms on Long Island.

After dropping out of college, he moved to Boston, attended Berklee for a year, met some musicians, and fell into the local '70s music scene, playing in various blues and R&B bands, fronting his own avant-garde jazz trio, joining the David Bromberg Band, hooking up with guitarist Guy Van Duser, with whom he still plays duos today, and in 1986, becoming a member of the New Black Eagles Jazz Band. But along with playing,

Novick, a longtime Lexington, MA resident, has also done loads of composing and arranging. "When I was a kid I wanted to be a composer even more than a musician," he said recently. "It was something about the grandness and permanence of it that appealed to me." He wrote and arranged both fusion and straight ahead jazz for his own bands; he improvised melodies while playing for modern dance classes, then later developed them into structured tunes; he became part of Mason Daring's film scoring team, specializing in jazz and ethnic sections of the scores.

A right time-right place situation got him in touch with Scott Speck, a conductor with the Washington Ballet, which led him to compose original music, and transcribe and rearrange a number of 1920s compositions and public domain songs for a 2010 production of "The Great Gatsby." He's currently at work with the same people on a ballet of "The Sun Also Rises," which will have its world premiere in May, 2013. Of course, Novick still finds time to play, regularly appearing with a couple of duos and trios, and with the New Black Eagles, Guy Van Duser, and his newest group, the Blue Syncopators, performing the music from the ballets. In rare spare moments, he continues to be a studio musician for hire. "I mostly stick to clarinet, and alto and soprano saxes at this point, but I've played tenor and baritone, mostly on recording sessions," he said. "Sometimes they've need a whole horn section, so they'll hire me to put down all four sax parts."

(By Ed Symkus)