



y way of interviews with his widow Lillie, son Gino, drummer Curtis Moore, and information provided by a cast of fans and friends the following is the story of Eugene Blacknell - a guitar genius, East Bay original, entrepreneur, activist, and a family man. With so many accomplishments it's an irony of fate that he died before releasing an album despite having recorded enough material for several.

At Hoover High School in Oakland, 1961, talented young guitar ace Eugene Blacknell fronted a band that included Joe McCoy and Robert Davis (drums), Clarke Smith (sax), and Nate James (bass). The Reverend Lyons aka Fat Daddy, was a local promoter who made sure Eugene Blacknell and his Savonics as they were known during this period, had all the musical equipment they needed. He also ran a record store (the Record Pit) and hosted record hops that all the local bands would perform at to promote their records. Fat Daddy would go on to become play the part of the preacher in the film *The Mack* which was filmed in Oakland. The first release from Eugene Blacknell and his Savonics is the "Don't Stop Now" b/w "Groove Mon-key" single released in the early 1960s on Clara, a label named after Fat Daddy's daughter. This single also featured The Four Rivers on vocals, made up of notable Bay Area singers: Kenneth Pleasant, Wylie Trass, Connie Bailey, and Fred Hughes.

Eugene met his soul mate and future wife Lillie Ann Candler in the junior year of McClymonds High School in Oakland at a talent competition. She needed a group to play for her vocal trio of school friends Barbara Boswell and Annie Mae Clark. The collaboration worked well and they won the show with a song called "Ooh-Poopa-Doo." Born to Ellis and Annie Blacknell in Berkeley, California, in 1946, Eugene was raised to be courteous, look sharp, and to have a head for business. "At school he'd wear a sport coat, slacks, and his hair was processed in a pompadour," says Lillie. "He picked me up every morning on the way to school which was a big deal back then. His car was pink and black with fins." Lillie remembers listening to "Mo Self," the second single released a year or two after "Don't Stop Now" every morning before she left for school. "Even in school Eugene played many live shows," she remembers. "He was all over Oakland and around the Bay in Modesto, Madera, and a lot of the military bases. He rehearsed everyday in a basement on Athens Avenue. That was the place to go! All kinds of people would come over, including folks like Larry Graham who learned bass from Eugene." Larry Graham and Eugene went to Elementary school together and

lived in the same neighborhood. The two played music and rode choppers (motorbikes that had been chopped-up to extend the front wheel out in front of the bike.) Eugene had bought a Honda 450 which he learned how to work on and modify. Bikes and slot cars were ways for the friends to hang out deep into each others careers.

ocal DJ Bob James of KDIA radio was a huge fan of Eugene Blacknell and the Savonics and made sure his records were played on the morning show. "To get him out of bed and on his way to school," jokes Lillie. He championed "Jump Back," the energetic soul-meets-surf guitar flipside to "Mo' Self", and was supportive from then on. Blacknell's act played back-up group and performed regularly with all the big names in the Bay Area soul, jazz, and blues scene including Jimmy McCracklin, The Dynamic 4, Jesse James, Joe Simon, Cal Valentine, Fred Hughes, The Right Kind, etc. Thursday through Sunday nights were filled with live gigs and all other nights involved practice. The Savonics became so good that they often walked away with the local talent shows. Lillie notes that not only did Blacknell's band sound good, they also looked sharp. "He wanted to make sure his group stood out. Any money they made went back into equipment or uniforms. That was the leader in him," she said.

When they first met, drummer Curtis Moore was in 10th grade and Eugene in 11th. "Eugene was clean, was never disrespectful, and never dissed anyone," he remembers. "He became my mentor, I was wild and street, but Eugene knew right from wrong. It took me a while to get it, but I settled down," he says. Moore would become a member of a later incarnation Eugene's outfit known as the New Breed, playing the magnificent drum breaks on tracks like "The Trip" and "Gettin' Down."

There were many local clubs where Eugene's act could be heard on a regular basis even at their young age. At Al's House of Smiles, owned by Al and Jo Gibson, he played almost at will. It was a spot that many of the East Bay bands performed at, including Marvin Holmes & the Uptights and Tower of Power, Sweets Ball Room, the Sportsman's, and the Showcase (where Lou Rawls got his start), were also regular outlets for Eugene's bands.

At the time big national acts like James Brown and Marvin Gaye would play at the Continental Club on 12th and Willow in West Oakland. Eugene knew the daughter of the owner of the club and he often scored the opening slots. Fat Daddy also had a lot of pull in the music business and was close with Marvin Gaye so Eugene opened for Gaye when he played in the Bay Area. After Graduation, in June 1964, Eugene immediately went on the road, despite having recently lost a finger in an accident at a part time job he held in a metal shop. Hired as band leader and musician for R&B vocalist Joe Simon, they mostly played the Southern circuit of venues. But when Simon played at the Apollo in New York in Eugene became one of the first and one of the youngest players from the Bay Area to perform at only 17 years of age. He toured with the band

until 1966 when rough times in the South made Eugene realize he should be home, with his family, and starting his own band. As a Californian he might not have been used to the levels of racism people endured in the South and he was shocked when the band were harassed by both public and police and at one time was even run off the road. Disappointed but inspired he headed home, The New Breed was born, and Eugene and Lillie married in 1967.

New Breaks With The New Breed

Over the years the New Breed included the following players: Curtis Moore (Drums), Nate James (Bass) Clarke Smith (Sax), Jules Broussard (Sax), Kevin Burton (Organ, Clavinet, Rhodes), George Keith (Drums), Jim Bradford (Drums), Charles Lockett (Bass), Darnell Darnell Wysinger (Bass), Steve Jones (Drums), Cal Vories (Organ, Clavinet), Darrell Broadnax (Bass), Telmech Grundy (Organ, Fender Rhodes), Gino Blacknell (Piano, Bass.) Bobby Reed (Bass) Dan Marshall (Tenor and Bari Sax) and Fredrick Collins (Tenor Sax) There were never any permanent female members of the band, "Because he didn't want that kind of problem and those distractions" remarks Lillie. Maxine Howard, Jeannie Tracey, and Faye Marshall all performed with Eugene, but never joined the band. Returning to Oakland after a gig at Joes Nairobi Lounge, in Palo Alto, members of the New Breed band walked into the House of Music to buy some records. Over weekends the store stayed open until 4am and local station KSOL would broadcast live from the DJ booth (The store was immortalized decades later by Oakland soul group Tony! Toni! Tone! who lived around the corner and used the name to title their fourth album). Marvin Scott was in the booth and announced the bands presence in the store. Curtis Moore handed Scott a copy of "The Trip," telling him they "had a hot little number." Scott played the song and flipped out. He played two other tracks and went back to "The Trip" to play it again. Bob Jones of KDIA happened to be in the building and asked if they had more copies, "Give me 50 and I'll give you free radio time. I'll blow you up on my show every Friday and Saturday night" he said. Moore said he was just part of the group but that he'd send Eugene to see him. The two met, and the deal was done. It was also the buzz from "The Trip" that caused Bert Bell, program director at KSOL, to call and ask the band to fill a last minute spot at a festival in Hunters Point. In exchange they were guaranteed airplay at the station and a favor. Tracks from the early New Breed era, like "The Trip" and "Gettin' Down," would go on to become a funk collectors pieces, and gold for producers looking to sample the insane drum breaks that Moore hammered out back in the day. "If you'd have seen me play that beat you wouldn't know how I did it. I didn't know how I did it at the time either! I was doing something very different with the snare," he says. Other tracks have also been sampled including "We Know We Have Got to Live Together" used most notably by Beck on "Black Tambourine." Moore also remembers that the band had previously recorded a song called "Papa Corn" and played it live but never got chance to record it. He says it sounded remarkably like James Browns "Mother Popcorn" when it was released but that there's no way to prove who came first. "Tower of Power copied a lot of

Clockwise Eugene (front), Raul, Nate James, Clarke Smith, Curtis Moore



stuff from us. When we played out they came to the shows. There were 9 of them and they were wondering how the 5 of us got such a big sound, especially out of 2 horns!" he adds. Fellow Bay Area Funk legend Marvin Holmes remembers that the band was super tight even early on, "He had a really funky band with a lot of good cats playing with him, they were killing it live!" he says. "It was fairly competitive between us and them at the time. We were the two most prominent bands, along with Johnny Talbot, so we kept each other on our toes." Jay Payton, a Bay Area entertainer who is celebrating his 60th year in the business in 2007 and who hosted the Top Star Awards from 1968 to 1996, worked with Eugene on a regular basis. "They were monstrous, sounded like 8 or 9 pieces, when they only had five," he remembers. "People knew what they were getting when they hired Eugene Blacknell, he kept a solid band together!" As the 1960s came to an end Eugene added vocals to his raw funk sound. The goal was to make his music ubiquitous and to get regular gigs on the lucrative Broadway strip in San Francisco's North Beach district. Tracks like "Get in a Hurry" and "I'm So Thankful" enabled the band to shift from instrumental back-up band to self-contained act, he also did not want to hire any more vocalists. Taking on vocal and writing duties the lyrics on "I'm So Thankful" set Blacknell's story so far in wax ...

"I'm So Thankful
That I hung on in there
It must have been the will of god
I do declare

I was being used
For a stepping stone
That I could see
So I came on home

Some people thought
I was insane
But something told me
Gene you can do your own thing

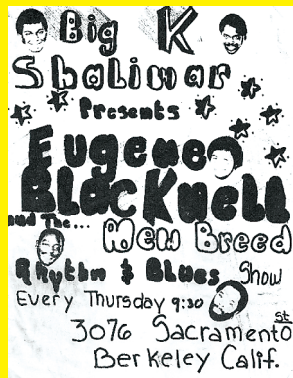
My faith was strong
And I held my own ground
And now can nothing
Keep me down

'Cos I got me a lady
That I know is true
I'm doing the thangs
That I want to do

Like playing my music
Not all the time
And that's what gives me
My piece of mind

My piece of mind
Is so divine
But it's so hard to find
Hard to find

Now that's my story
Now I'm through
Just one more thing I wanna do ...
Shoo doo doo shoo doo doo



Eugene Blacknell/backstage @ Amoeba - San Francisco



Eugene & Nate @ the Dragon A GoGo (SF)



Joe Simon and Eugene Blacknell at Amoeba - San Francisco



Lillie Blacknell



Eugene, Eugene Jr. & Lillie



Eugene & Lillie



Emma Casella (Lillie's daughter), Lillie, Eugene, Antonette & Eugene Blacknell

Eugene Blacknell - The Musician And The Businessman

The Blacknell family moved east from Oakland to Richmond in late 1970 to get away from the social troubles that were brewing in West Oakland. At the same time the New Breed became the first East Bay band to get a regular spot in San Francisco's lucrative North Beach district. They had caught the eye of bookers while opening for the Whispers at the Dragon A-Go-Go in neighboring China Town. They were also first to get a regular gig at The Lucky 13 in Albany. "Eugene was into blues and was often compared to Albert King and BB King which was a big and unique compliment for a young player," explains Lillie. "Eugene stretched beyond what other black bands were playing. The blues would attract a cross-over crowd and that got him gigs. He was ahead of his time in that regard." Local music writer Lee Hildebrand suggests that Eugene put a unique spin on a traditional Oakland sound, "His rhythmically propulsive guitar style was rooted in the Oakland blues tradition of Lafayette "Thing" Thomas and Johnny Heartsman, but much like his contemporaries Johnny Talbot and Marvin Holmes, he updated it with a heavy dose of funk."

Eugene continued to play the military circuit and even traveled to Canada. He never flew; instead he converted a truck to include a couch, to include room for uniforms and to be comfortable for the band. He spent all week setting up gigs on the telephone and treated the military circuit weekend gigs like a business playing all and every weekend.

"A job to Eugene was the music, he lived and breathed it. You've got to be a musician and a business man. He made it look easy because his Dad taught him how to transact business and make sure you get paid what you're worth," says Moore. "He put his band together properly and so they got paid. Eugene made it easy for the band to rehearse, booked the shows, and paid the bills. He was responsible and fair making sure the band went home with money for their families. I didn't want a job either, I wanted to work for myself," jokes Moore. "Eugene taught me how to do that."

There were many discrepancies for African American musicians to deal with, particularly from the local clubs regarding pay for the bands. Eventually Blacknell's group made the local clubs pay union wages instead of the lower-than-union wages they were being offered from union clubs. The local San Francisco Union wouldn't accept their application, stating they weren't good enough musicians. Disappointed but undeterred, they went to join a union in nearby Modesto. In order for their Union memberships to count in San Francisco they were made to read music scores at the Symphony. Fortunately they'd learned to read music in high school and knew it all back-to-front, "They didn't think these Black kids would be able to read those classical pieces, but we showed them," laughed Moore. "Joining the Union allowed us to get paid properly for sessions and earn royalties."

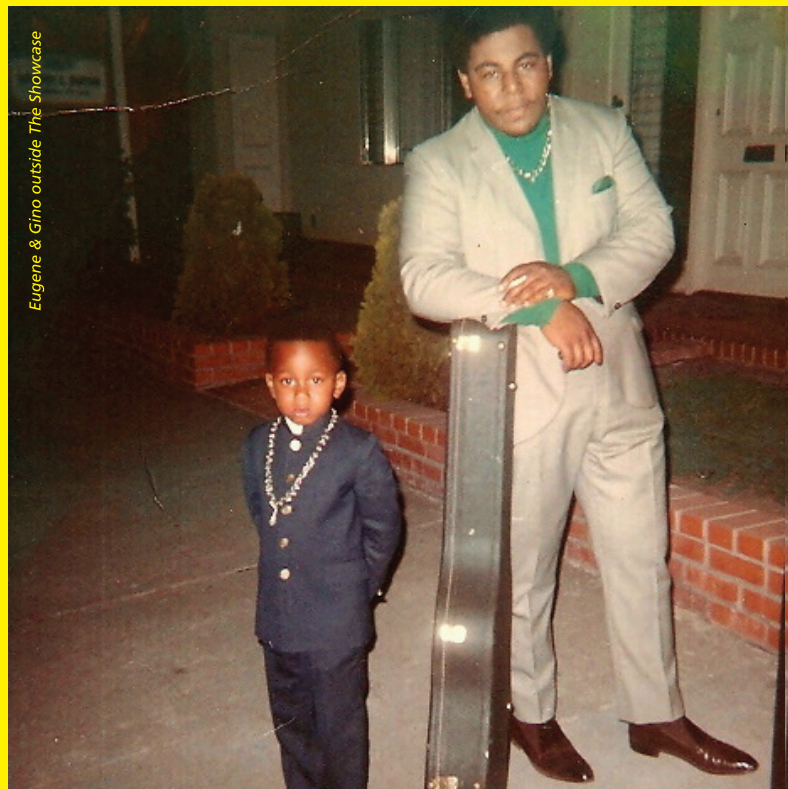
Bert Bell delivered his favor-owed when he invited the band to perform at a private party at the Soultrain club in San Francisco to be hosted by Liberty Records. The band knew this was their shot at serious exposure and a potential record deal. Practicing hard they even bought new canary yellow suits especially for the performance. "Eugene had taste and was always finding unique spots to buy clothes, we were clean, and you couldn't find a wrinkle in our shirts," says Moore. "All the other bands wanted to look like each other, but not Eugene." First on stage they blew the spot up and were subsequently offered a recording contract. However, no deal went through. Moore speculates that internal disagreements over distribution of money were to blame. Gino Blacknell, Eugene's son, and Lillie both think that ultimately Eugene was more concerned with playing live and never took the time or showed much interest in releasing an album.

Despite recording multiple singles and having more than enough material Eugene Blacknell and the New Breed did not release an album at the peak of their popularity or before Eugene's untimely passing in 1990. Gino approached Ubiquity Records in 2006 with the idea of releasing an album while attending a party for the Bay Area Funk compilation in San Francisco. He and Lillie compiled mass amounts of tapes and singles, along with outtakes, live tracks, unreleased tunes and even the radio jingles promoting live shows. "My mom has wanted this to happen for a while now, but she didn't know how and it took me this long to find someone who could put it together the right way," he says. "I didn't know there was an audience out there who really wanted to know about Eugene or even cared for his music, maybe a song here and there, but not the whole story." Lillie pressured Gino into making the album happen and he spent hours going through tapes, making mixes from unmixed masters, and re-mixing the tracks where possible.

Born in 1964 Gino was dancing at live shows with the band at just 3 years of age and sat in playing guitar at the tender age of 6. He joined the band officially in 1978. "I worked my way up to being the bass player after proving that I wanted to play bass for real, pops would not tolerate me doing music half-way, either you were all the way in or all the way out," says Gino. "I played bass and when we started having keyboard player problems I learned all the songs on keys and taught one of my friends the songs the bass parts so that he was also in the line-up!"

Since the New Breed Gino has become a producer and played in many bands, including Timex Social Club (during the "Rumors" era), The Whispers, Lenny Williams, ConFunkShun, Howard Hewitt (of Shalamar), Joe Louis Walker, Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, Percy Mayfield, Funk Family Stone, the Sly Stone reunion group, The Barkays, The Dazz Band, and Michael Cooper. He's done studio work for Frankie Beverly and Maze, The Black Eyed Peas, and produced albums for Michael Cooper, The Lunizs, Joe Louis Walker, Askari X, and MC Pooh.

During the process of putting this album together Gino suffered chest pains that turned out to be a series of minor heart attacks. At time of writing he is in good shape and recovering well and was able to help finish out this project, which in the meantime we had coincidentally titled "You Can't Take Life For Granted" after one of the unreleased cuts.



Eugene & Gino outside The Showcase

HOLDING ON

E. Blacknell

Handwritten musical notation for the song "Holding On" by Eugene. The notation is written on a five-line staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The notation includes chords, notes, and lyrics.

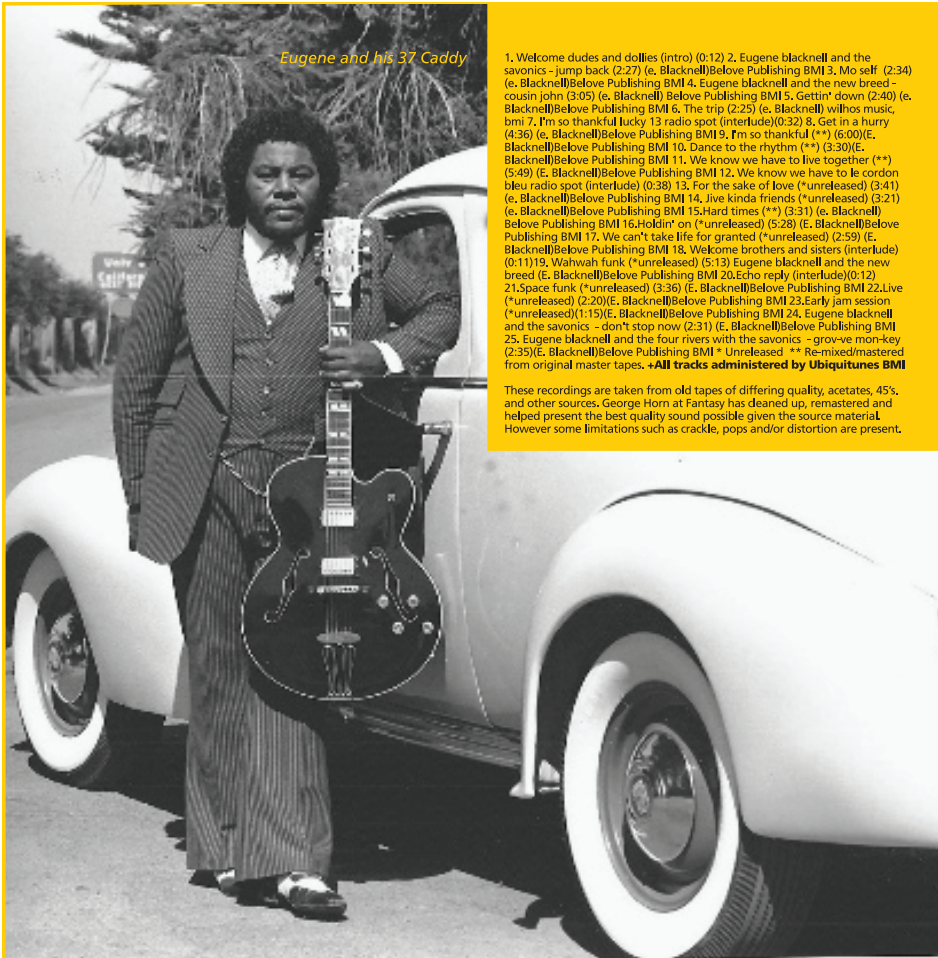
Chords and notes written above the staff:

- OP x x x x x x x F# E min 9 E min 9 E min 13 F# 9 E min 9
- E min 9 E min 11 E min 9 E min 9 E min 9 E min 9 E min 9
- E min 9 E min 9 F# 9 13 F# 9 9 E min 9
- HOLDING ON I GOT TO KEEP HOLDING ON
- UNTIL I GET ENOUGH
- OF THIS WORLD
- E min 9 E min 11 E min 9 E min 9 E min 13 E min 9

Notes written below the staff:

- F# 0
- 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100

Eugene and his 37 Caddy



1. Welcome dudes and dollies (intro) (0:12) 2. Eugene blacknell and the savonics - jump back (2:27) (e. Blacknell)Belove Publishing BMI 3, Mo self (2:34) (e. Blacknell)Belove Publishing BMI 4, Eugene blacknell and the new breed - cousin john (3:05) (e. Blacknell) Belove Publishing BMI 5, Gettin' down (2:40) (e. Blacknell)Belove Publishing BMI 6, The trip (2:25) (e. Blacknell) wilhos music, bmi 7, I'm so thankful lucky 13 radio spot (interlude)(0:32) 8, Get in a hurry (4:36) (e. Blacknell)Belove Publishing BMI 9, I'm so thankful (***) (6:00)(E. Blacknell)Belove Publishing BMI 10, Dance to the rhythm (***) (3:30)(E. Blacknell)Belove Publishing BMI 11, We know we have to live together (***) (5:49) (E. Blacknell)Belove Publishing BMI 12, We know we have to be cordon bleu radio spot (interlude) (0:38) 13, For the sake of love (*unreleased) (3:41) (e. Blacknell)Belove Publishing BMI 14, Jive kinda friends (*unreleased) (3:21) (e. Blacknell)Belove Publishing BMI 15, Hard times (***) (3:31) (e. Blacknell) Belove Publishing BMI 16, Holdin' on (*unreleased) (5:28) (E. Blacknell)Belove Publishing BMI 17, We can't take life for granted (*unreleased) (2:59) (E. Blacknell)Belove Publishing BMI 18, Welcome brothers and sisters (interlude) (0:11) 19, Wahwah funk (*unreleased) (5:13) Eugene blacknell and the new breed (E. Blacknell)Belove Publishing BMI 20, Echo reply (interlude)(0:12) 21, Space funk (*unreleased) (3:36) (E. Blacknell)Belove Publishing BMI 22, Live (*unreleased) (2:20) (E. Blacknell)Belove Publishing BMI 23, Early jam session (*unreleased) (1:15) (E. Blacknell)Belove Publishing BMI 24, Eugene blacknell and the savonics - don't stop now (2:31) (E. Blacknell)Belove Publishing BMI 25, Eugene blacknell and the four rivers with the savonics - grove mon-key (2:35) (E. Blacknell)Belove Publishing BMI * Unreleased ** Re-mixed/mastered from original master tapes. **All tracks administered by Ubiquitous BMI**

These recordings are taken from old tapes of differing quality, acetates, 45's, and other sources. George Horn at Fantasy has cleaned up, remastered and helped present the best quality sound possible given the source material. However some limitations such as crackle, pops and/or distortion are present.



Counter Clockwise: Eugene, Gino, Baldwin, Donald Ray Wilcox and Myron Pipkin

Liner notes, research and compilation by Andrew Jervis and the Ubiquity Crew.
Art direction and design by Ashkahn.

This album would not exist without the efforts of Gino and Lillie Blacknell.

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