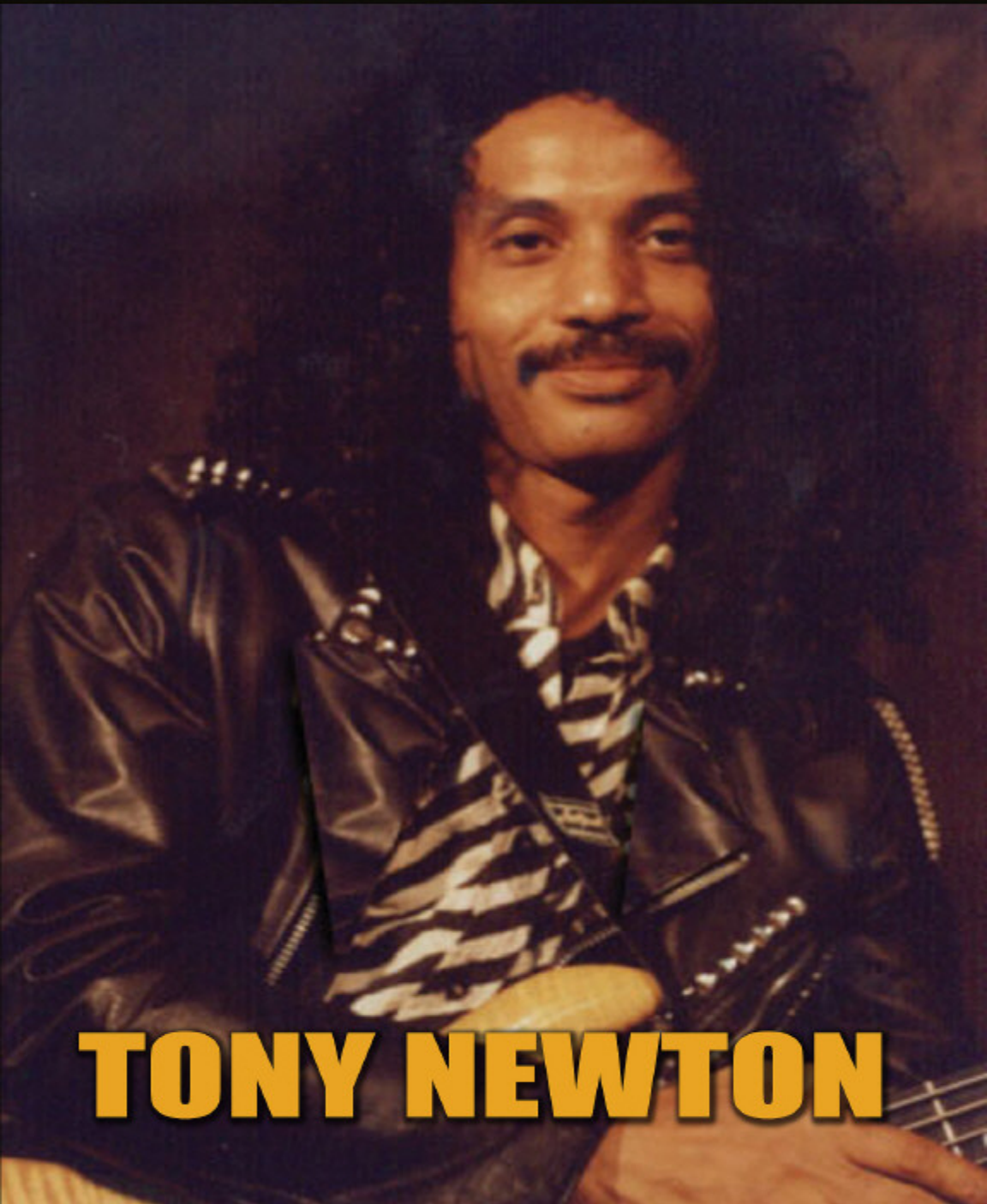


# ***GOLD THUNDER***

*Legendary Adventures of a Motown Bassman*



**TONY NEWTON**

Gold Thunder

# ***GOLD THUNDER***

## Gold Thunder

### *Accolades for Tony*

Tony Newton has always been on the leading edge of music. His style and precision has long been recognized by real players in the industry. – Clarence McDonald Grammy Winning Keyboardist

Tony Newton, one of the most talented entities I have ever had the pleasure to hear and get to know, Truly a diamond that will not be hidden. Jauqo III-X, Bassist/Producer

I met Tony at a Motown session, I had heard through the vine as well as hearing his playing how great he was, he was Smokey Robinson's musical director and played with Tony Williams, whom I admired what a great musician talent as well as a great person Tony. James Gadson – World Renowned Drummer/Producer

Mean Streets Rock Magazine of Los Angeles states, "Tony Newton is a monumental master and true music visionary!"

I have never met anybody in my life that has given me the truth in so different many forms -- Life long lessons that inspire, guide, teach, follow through, and just totally give it all. Tony is not only one of the greatest musicians I've ever heard or worked with, but through him, I have been given the opportunity to see music and life through the eyes of a true genius! Tony, we love you, Mike, Marcia, and Dalton. – MMM Music

Tony Newton, is one of the best creative minds I come across in my lifetime and he is also a real musical genius dating back to Motown as a musician known as the baby funk brother – Lou Nathan, CEO Nexxus Ent.

I say here and now, in my estimation, based on the facts, Tony Newton is a Funk Brother – Jack Ashford Legendary Motown Funk Brother and Grammy Winner

Tony and I have played on many recordings together and he always plays his butt off. He is a true "Funk Brother." – Eddie Willis Grammy winning Motown guitarist and Funk Brother

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Tony Newton is one of the most innovative and creative musicians and bassists of our time. He has been rocking everyone's world from the bottom up for years. I first met and began recording with Tony at Holland-Dozier-Holland's Invictus and Hotwax labels. As I played the piano, in the headphones, I was immediately impressed with the strength, precision and creativity of Tony Newton's bass lines. Take a listen now and you too will be equally amazed. Tony is also a great friend with a warm and caring spirit and, if you listen carefully, you'll hear that spirit reflected in his music. - Sylvester Rivers IMC Entertainment Group

As a fellow musician I can say that Tony Newton has been part of so much musical history, from his early Motown connections, to some of the true beginnings of fusion, he has done it all. - Bob Lee- Bassland.com

Tony has been my friend ever since the first day I met him. He was already friends with my father (Dr. Beans Bowles of Motown) who introduced us. I thought that he was a young black genius when I met him. He thought of something and would make it come to life. He's been a creator all of his life. To start with nothing and end up with a master piece sums up who Tony is. Tony definitely has character with the go motivation to conquer every obstacle that comes in his path. Truly a positive and spiritual person. – Dennis Bowles, Author-Musician-Producer

Tony Newton is a virtual caldron of creative energy. With many skills and talents which he combined with his desire, faith and character, he developed into the great legendary individual that is Tony Newton. My life is better from knowing him – Melvin Davis – Award Winning Legendary Soul Vocalist-Songwriter-Musician-Producer

Once in a while, not very often, a songwriter will come up with what we call a "classic" that's what Tony Newton has managed to do on Tony Williams album "Believe it" Newton's songs "Snake Oil " and "Red Alert" are both classics. I just played a week's gig at the Iridium club in New York. Guess what the only song we played that wasn't my own? Snake Oil of course! - Robby Krieger, The Doors

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# ***GOLD THUNDER***

# **TONY NEWTON**

“Legendary Adventures  
of a Motown Bassist”



# Gold Thunder

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GOLD THUNDER - TONY NEWTON

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DEDICATIONS

*Dedicated to the memory of my father Stanford Newton for  
starting and supporting me in music and both my birth  
Mother Lucille and Step Mother Betty.*

*To my loving and beautiful sister Millenor "Bitty" Byrd  
and my sons' Shon, Antonio I, and Antonio II*



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- \* Much appreciation to Gary and Mitch Snyder who have supported me musically and financially over the many years we have worked together.
- \* Dr. Elizabeth Marshall and the Inglewood, CA. Center for Spiritual Living for musical and spiritual support.
- \* To the memory of my Bass hero and mentor James Jamerson Sr. for his innovative teachings, inspiration and musical support.
- \* To Smokey Robinson and the Miracles who first gave me a chance at Motown along with Hank Cosby who discovered me.
- \* Much gratefulness goes to Holland-Dozier-Holland for giving me a chance on their staff as bassist and producer and starting my career as a music artist.
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## Gold Thunder



Let the pulse of the mighty Bass sound  
Let life and joy begin in continuous round  
    Feel the love of harmonious beauty  
    Feel joy's power as it does its duty  
    Feel your soul and spirit soar and fly  
Feel your loving heart take to heavens sky  
    Day and night, it keeps up the fight  
Day and night, it beams with golden light  
    Bringing music gifts of silver and gold  
    Bringing to us good vibrations untold  
Bringing its good power throughout the land  
    Ringing through the airwaves  
    the touch of God's hand



## INTRODUCTION

Hello, my name is Tony Newton; I am a musician. I believe that each and all of us have a specific purpose or mission in life. There are those who go through life without ever knowing this precious knowledge. Some are born knowing, and then there are those who stumble across it. There are also those who guide and shape their destiny. I guess that I have a little of each of these within me because originally my goal was to become an FBI agent and stop crime, until fate and genetics pointed me in a musical direction.

The name of this book is *Gold Thunder*, the “Gold” referring to the quest for Gold, a Gold Record that is, the upper most and important goal in a musical artist’s or musician’s mind. It means the record you have performed on has sold one million units. The Gold Record represents a lifetime of secure work, as long as you are healthy and of sound mind. To perform on a Gold Record as a musician is a big boon for both the bank and ego. Record producers want musicians who have previously worked on other “hits” because they have the hit “sound,” so to speak. A musician playing with Gold Record artists is a much desired commodity. This is because of the higher pay scale and work stability. You can be paid as much as three times the standard union scale amount for a single session. Plus, the more hits you’ve played on, the more future work you continue to get. To play on a Gold Record is a lifetime dream for many musicians throughout the world 24/7. It means fame and fortune, literally. It really is your 15 minutes of glory. Some even are lucky enough to perform on more than one or several Gold recordings. Of course I’ve

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played on at least 50-100 other recordings that for one reason or another were never released, not promoted well enough, or were just not good enough to make it up the charts to a top 40 or 10 position. But I am proud to say that I have played on more than 25 Gold records.

When I was young, before my teens, I listened to a lot of radio. Radio in the late fifties and throughout the 60-90's was a fluent technology in everyone's home. I used to awaken to and go to sleep by the sound of the radio. In the early days there wasn't much black or "colored" music or music shows on the little broadcasting machine. Mostly country and adult music was on the air. I didn't mind listening to country because I liked the stories and lyrics. I liked *Hank Williams*, *Johnny Cash*, *Les Paul and Mary Ford* and others. On some nights, like Friday and Saturday nights, if you turned your radio a certain direction and put a hanger on the antenna, you could pick up specialty stations and DJs like "*Wolfman Jack*." Wolfman played all types of young music, both Rock and R&B. Here you could listen to the latest popular music as it was coming on the market. Little did I know that one day I would be heard on the radio.

When I started playing professionally at age 14, I wanted in on that American Dream – to play on recordings and be played on the radio. I didn't realize what a Gold Record was until later, when I learned about the top 10 or forty sellers. I had dabbled in sports speed-skating in a few local races with moderate success, and really liked it, but I decided music was my ticket to ride. I knew what a Gold Ribbon Award was and it usually meant fame and fortune on some level. This was

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my early experience with winning Gold. But I knew inside that music was my golden opportunity!

I missed the draft; a heart murmur caused me to be classified a 4F for health reasons. So I did not get a chance to participate in the Vietnam War, which, at the time, represented my other opportunity to get away from the house and live on my own. But as fate would have it, I started playing music professionally.

My hometown, Detroit, in the 60's was a dynamic and creative urban city, bustling with plenty of jobs from the automobile industry. The Vietnam War, the Hippy movement, social and racial change were also happening in a big way. People were starting to say what was really on their minds. The hippie "free love" movement meant that everyone was a little friendlier during these times. The Civil Rights movement was also starting to gain momentum. You also had quite a cross section of middle income Blacks, due to many good and profitable jobs. Actually, music accelerated the "integration" movement. Because of all kinds of music playing on radio throughout the country, all types and races of people would go to concerts of both black and white artists. Some of the time, records were released without the artist's photo on the album and you didn't see them until you went to their concert. It was a time of great change. Music of all types was coming on the scene and having a huge impact on society. Detroit was also a town of intense danger, with its share of the criminal element. The town actually was called "murder capital" in those times. With all this going on, the Motor City was still one of the most exciting places to live for

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a musician.

I also grew up in a time when the electric bass was the new technology and revolutionized the popular music industry. The bass guitar gave the music of the time a fresh new, energetic, motivating and captivating sound tool. It moved the body, mind and soul and inspired the listener to get up from the comfort of his seat and start dancing. It was the sound of pulsating “thunder,” as in this book’s title, *Gold Thunder*, that turned ordinary sounding music and recordings into vital, dynamic records that went “Gold.” Music lovers everywhere now had a full fidelity sound that ranged from the very low to very high. This was a new level of experience. Music was exploding throughout the world’s airwaves, while the bass guitar continued to keep pumping out solid, inspiring bass lines on recordings everywhere.

The bass guitar makes you “feel real good” inside. Played slow or fast, it can get your juices and blood flowing within seconds, even if it doesn’t have your attention. I’m sure that out of all the music that I’ve recorded over the years, you’ve listened to me and liked what you heard on the bottom end bass even if you didn’t focus on or identify the bass. I’m sure the bass made you get up and start moving or at least start nodding your head to the groove. Chances are that even though we don’t know each other, I’ve rocked your world.

I embarked on my personal quest for Gold - as a musician to the stars, and to reach my own personal level of artistic expression and excellence. My journey led me to many well-springs of shiny Gold by performing on many Gold and

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Platinum recordings and performing live concert tours for many years with Gold and Platinum recording artists. The ride has not been an easy one, it has been filled with plenty of heartache, financial un-compensation, disrespect, mental and emotional anxiety, and depression for some and other negative energies. The path is challenging if you want a reasonable and fulfilling life. On the other hand, there is no greater joy than doing what you most love, and were put here on earth to do. So I became a musician and a bass player - at the center of a cultural explosion that expanded and changed American popular music in a way never before seen. This is my story.





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*You couldn't imagine the challenges and roadblocks that I have encountered over the years. I don't have a monkey on my back. It seems as though I have a worst situation. I have the Devil on my back night and day and his helpers to turn my light off and to keep me in obscurity, but I just keep focusing and nourishing the Divine truth and creativity that flows in, through and around me .....*

## CHAPTER 1 - THE GREATEST GIFT

It was very cold this winter morning. A usual -3 degree Detroit December and the wind was howling up a snowy blizzard outside. But I didn't care, because it was Christmas morning and inside our home it was especially cozy in the living room around the tree unwrapping gifts with my big sister, Bitty. She handed me a long skinny present, and as I took it from her, unbeknown to me, this would be the beginning of a new life -- all from a simple present. I surmise that I received this musical gift because my father noticed me always going to a neighbor's house and banging around on their piano for long hours at a time. We couldn't afford a piano, thus this alternative.

Tearing off the Christmas wrapping, there it was! My big surprise was a shiny gold plastic saxophone. Not only dazzling in appearance, it actually played sounds and notes. I don't think they still make them. I have never seen one like it since. I was already excited from all the Christmas energy, so how was I to know how special this particular Christmas gift would be, and how it would influence the rest of my life. I played the keys off this plastic saxophone until I started school, where I was lent an instrument to take home and practice. This was in the days, thank goodness for me, when all the schools had music programs, classes and instruments to loan students.

My father gave me this gift. He wasn't a musician himself; he was a foreman at the Ford Motor Company. Most people that lived in Detroit, if they were male, worked at one of the

automobile factories. The Detroit automotive industry was booming in the 50's and 60's. It was the land of milk and honey. My father had relocated to Detroit from Patterson, New Jersey. My mother, Lucille Killian was a young woman of 22 when I was born. She died from an internal surgery when I was two years old. It is a sad legacy for me that I have never even seen a photograph of my mother, so I don't know what she looked like. My memories of her are through my sister and relatives. She was Spanish and Black with a fiery temperament, which I inherited. If she got really angry at my father, the Spanish and dishes would fly. She was by all accounts very beautiful. Being a party woman, she often held bingo parties at the house. For a brief time we had a real family with my birth mother and half-sister Bitty from my mom's first marriage.

Lucille was working in a red light district house in Chicago, when Bittys' father, William "Pete" Woods, a jazz drummer with Count Bassie, met her, fell in love, took her out of there and started a relationship with her. When this relationship ended, she married my father Stan, and I was born. Only two years later our mother Lucille died while in the hospital at the age of 24 and I was left with a deep imprint of abandonment that would continue to haunt me throughout my life. **(This is my sister recollection of that time: "Tony was too young to remember our mom's passing, but I remember it like it happened yesterday even though I was only five at the time. I remember a lot of people at our house and being on someone's shoulders, looking down at her in her coffin. I wanted to touch her and wake her up. At the funeral, I was crying so hard, all this snot came out of my nose, and**

someone, cleaned my nose and put me on their lap. I was fully aware of what was happening. She wore something that was pink, and she looked so beautiful. From my understanding, there was bad blood between her and her sister, my Aunt Eva. She had told daddy Stan not to bring Eva down to the hospital, where she was going to get her tubes tied. Somehow Aunt Eva talked him into taking her to see our mother. My mother flipped and told my step-dad she would never speak to him again. She never woke up from surgery. Stan said that this had haunted him for along time. I remember many a night before my mother's death when she would wake up screaming; she was having a nightmare in which she saw herself in a coffin. I guess she could see her future.")

I am sure I was impacted by my sister's expressions of profound loss, even though I was only two, as we were very close and she always cared for me. Later, when my father remarried it drew us even closer since to us our lives were by no means normal, starting with our parents. Our father, who was my natural father and my sister, Bitty's step dad, found himself a single parent of two children, so he sent me to New Jersey with his sister, my Aunt Maude, and Bitty was taken to Chicago to be with her father until my dad could pull something together. He started dating Betty Wilson, who came from Nashville, Tennessee. They were introduced by her sister, our Auntie Elizabeth Davis.

Stan wanted to keep his family unit together and so he found Betty to care for us. Little did he know what an impact this new mother would have on me and my sister. My father was a very hard working man. I guess that is where I get my work

ethic. He would work at Ford for eight hours and then come home and do odd jobs like painting, electrical, and plumbing for other people during his off hours. He would then come home, eat dinner and read the *Detroit News* and go to bed. The next morning he would wake up and do it all over again. On weekends he would go hunting or fishing, or watch boat races, the Harlem Globetrotters and things like that to amuse himself. I never saw or went with him to any music related shows. Only later in life, when I had a school music concert would he come to support me. Although, he did tell me one day about a cousin of his that played trumpet and another family member that played sax. I never got a chance during my upbringing to meet either of them. My father was a proud, yet humble type. He was built very stocky and, even though of average height, he had an air of power and manifestation. He could get what he wanted by working hard for it.

The horror of my life began at the hands of my stepmother. Because Auntie Elizabeth was much older than Betty, I do not think my Aunt Elizabeth realized how unstable her sister was when she introduced this woman, who would become my stepmother, to my father. My stepmother's usual disposition was mean, bossy and abusive. I got smacked around a lot, she had all kinds of rules about food, and where we could go, and what we were allowed to do.

We were convinced my father married her because he needed someone to take care of us. Obviously, she did not want to take care of us; she just wanted the relationship with my father. There was no love between them and they slept in separate rooms. We could see that they didn't have any

closeness, except for when we could hear them having sex. I didn't really ever feel comfortable around her at anytime, because she made you feel uneasy. She would smack us around and yell at us a lot, which led my sister and me to run away from home several times. This one time Bitty ran away with me in tow, we were hiding in a garage and my hands were cold, so she told me to stick them in my britches. We were discovered by a neighbor and Bitty told him that we were running away because our stepmother was so mean to us. Well, we got delivered back home and in my innocence I blurted out, "Bitty said you were mean to us, you're not mean are you?" Of course, I don't have to tell you that my sister got a huge whooping for that. Because of violence towards us, we didn't like it there with her at all. I recall not having washed my hands well enough once, and she dragged me to the bathroom sink tap and ran my hands under scalding hot water. We really thought this woman was nuts and in retrospect she probably was or at least needed counseling and/or medication.

Many times she choked me around the neck until I would nearly pass out. One time in particular when I was about ten years old, my sister came into the bathroom and Betty was choking me by the neck across the side of the bath tub. My sister freaked out and tried to get a knife from the kitchen. Bitty wanted to stab our stepmother in the back and make all this end. That was the last straw for Bitty; she knew she had to get out, with or without me.

Bitty recalled that she had run away so many times, that the court told her, the next time she did it, they would send her to reform school, which sounded like a good idea at the time

because she just wanted out of the situation. No one ever believed her, when she told them what was going on; not even daddy Stan, I guess he did not want to deal with it. Our stepmother was very cunning, like most child abusers. A year after Bitty ran away at age 14 and moved to Cleveland, they found her through her school records and came to get her and take her back to Detroit. She told my dad, if he took her back, she would run away again because of Betty. She told Stan that she loved him, and me, her little brother, but she did not want to be around Betty. Finally, Betty's sister, Aunt Elizabeth, got in touch with Bitty's dad Pete and told him what was going on, so he sent Auntie the money to get Bitty a train ticket. Aunt Elizabeth took Bitty to the train station where she was put on a train to Cleveland to live with her real father. Bitty recalled that she felt haunted by me because she could not take me with her. She often asked her birth dad if he could send for me, but of course, he could not. The next time she saw me, was when she moved back to Detroit in 1965 and the first question I asked her was, why she didn't take me with her. She had kept in touch with my father while she was in Cleveland, and often told him to tell her baby brother that she loved him. Stan and Betty came often to see Bitty in Cleveland, but they never took me with them. When Bitty left I wished that she had taken me.

It was okay, but I think my life would have been a lot different if she had. Bitty said she tried to forget everything that had happened back in Detroit and for a while she did. She had always wanted an apology from our stepmother, but never got one. Later in the 80's while on my spiritual path, I wanted to get things clear with my stepmother, as I didn't want to

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carry around a lot of anger throughout my life about the situation. I visited her after my father had died and she had moved and returned to her native hometown and family in Nashville, Tennessee. During that visit, we had many heart to heart conversations about what went on with me as a kid. She still didn't get completely what I was expressing and insisted she tried to be a good mother to us. I accepted that she was doing the best she could at the time, forgave her and moved on with my life.

But as the phoenix rises from the ashes, good comes from the negative, this was my path.





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*Sir Tony Newton and I first met in junior high school; naturally after speaking, we had a musical battle. Tony on sax, and myself on trombone. From that day on, we have been fast friends. After mastering the saxophone family, Tony began to play the electric bass. We shared many experiences as bandmates and roommates, as we recorded for Motown records, as well as many other record companies. I know for a fact that Tony Newton is one of the most innovative, energetic and creative musical minds of our time. – Mc Kinley Jackson, Legendary Motown, H-D-H Producer/Arranger*

## CHAPTER 2 - THE REAL DEAL

Upon entering school, I was about to graduate from plastic to real instruments and follow the inspiration of the “golden gift” plastic saxophone.

Our home at 2927 Putnam Street was a small, quaint house on the west side of Detroit. My stepmother used to play a lot of records and listen to the radio when she was at home and not working as a maid at the Sheraton Cadillac in downtown Detroit. She played the music of **Little Richard, Big Mama Thornton, Mills Brothers, Elvis, Ray Charles, Etta James** and others, as well as Gospel music every Sunday. I didn't know it then, but I was getting early music training listening to these artists.

The Putnam house was close to both McGraw elementary, Mc Michael junior and Northwestern high schools, which were all in reasonable walking distance of each other, within an eight to fifteen block radius. While my informal musical training was listening to the music enjoyed by my stepmother at home, my early formal education was in the public schools of my neighborhood in Detroit. I started out at McGraw elementary playing on a school clarinet for about a year. Then my father Stan bought me a real alto saxophone. In those days music programs were still in the public school system, unlike today where there are few music classes or programs. In the fifties and sixties all schools had an orchestra, symphonic band, marching band, and choirs of several ensembles including male, female and mixed choirs. I studied music from elementary school through high school in Detroit, although I would take college courses and continue

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my music education and studies later in life when I moved to California.

When I finally reached Mc Michael Junior High, I started to play in small ensembles with musicians from my school and musicians from other schools throughout the city whom I met when playing downtown on Saturday in the Cass Tech all-city band orchestra. It was at Mc Michael, that I met the conductor **Harold Arnoldi**, for whom I played classical music in bands and the school orchestra and who would be a major force in my musical development through his endearing support. Actually, I played several instruments over the years in orchestra. I played Clarinet, Bass and Alto Clarinet, all of the Saxophones C Melody, Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Baritone and Bass Saxes, along with Flute and piccolo. It was also here that I met, as a very young kid like myself, **Paul Riser**, the trombonist who would later go on to become one of Motown's most talented arrangers and trombonists on recordings.

When I was in high school, I remember that my father had worked very hard so we could move to a better neighborhood and a bigger house on Detroit's north side. Our new address was 251 Westminster Street. This was a more middle class neighborhood. I recall it was around the corner from the great Aretha Franklin and the Prophet Jones mansions. We now had four bedrooms, and a two-car garage. The house was so nice, it even had automatic lawn sprinklers, which was a new thing for me.

First I would go to Northern High School and then was transferred to Moore School for Boys after getting into some

trouble at school. Sometimes your passion can get you into trouble and that's exactly what happened in this case. At this time in my life I was still young and hadn't thought about being a professional musician. I wanted to be in the FBI. That was my dream at the moment but it was not to be. In all my reading I came across an ad for metal gun replicas. It looked just like a 38 gun in the ad, and since I wanted to play FBI too early, I sent for the metal gun replica. When it arrived in the mail, it didn't have any holes in the barrel or where you put bullets. So I had the smart idea of having someone in metal shop class at school drill the holes for me. But the teacher busted him and then he told on me. Oh well! Actually, this turned out fine. After Moore, I went to Sherrard Junior High. There, I met **McKinley Jackson**, who, like me, was highly passionate about music and jazz at the time. McKinley, also a trombonist, would go on to become **Marvin Gaye's** music director and the main arranger for the **Holland-Dozier-Holland** songwriter, producing team at Invictus and HDH records, which they formed after they leaving Motown. McKinley and I formed our first really serious jazz band, consisting of five or six players. We played after school, at weekend parties mostly. I played sax in this group, **The Mount Royal Clefs**.

Living on the northwest side of Detroit in my pre-teen and teen years was very good for me musically. It was here that I developed my professional musician chops and skills. It was also here that I began to play the electric bass. Besides the group, The Mount Royal Clefs, I would also play with other local groups. There was this big theater on Woodward Avenue on the north side of Detroit that had been turned into a

club named the Tantrum, later changed to, The Village, which was owned by lawyer Gabe Glantz. Lots of musicians and artists from many genres of music played here in all its transitions. You had artists, anywhere from the great and popular rock and roll artist, **Chuck Berry**, to the legendary jazz drummer, **Chico Hamilton**, with everything in between. This is really where **Weather Report** and **Dave Brubeck** drummer, **Steve Booker**, and I met and played with a lot of artists. I was still playing saxophone with McKinley Jackson in the beginning. Most clubs featured blues, jazz or rock. In those days the electric bass was just coming into its own. You could hear the electric bass on a few records on the radio, but mostly it was still the upright bass. However, in the late fifties you could hear the electrical bass becoming more prominent on popular recordings and radio.

In 1963, I played saxophone with this white rock band, the **Thunder Rocks**, where I was the only "Colored" guy in the group. In fact, eventually they had to let me go because in those days whites didn't want coloreds in their clubs with or without a band. However, this band and my good friend drummer **Steve "Muruga" Booker** and bassist **Bruce Penner**, and guitarist **Pat LaRose** took me under their wings to show me the rock music business. This was my first experience playing with a rock band that had a real electric **Fender Precision bass**. This is "the" bass of choice with its, big, fat, round, sound, that along with an amplifier could power and drive a band and people on the dance floor to heights of heated passion.

I borrowed the bass from the bassist in the group on evenings when it wasn't being used, and soon after, he started playing

a more glamorous instrument, the electric guitar. This allowed me to practice and start playing the bass at parties, clubs, hotels, concerts, and on recordings. I carried it with me everywhere along with my saxophone. I even took it to school to show my teacher who at the time could not make hide nor tails of the thing in his own words. But, I knew that instrument was destined for greatness and popularity. I knew that if I could learn to play this dynamic instrument of the rhythm section (drums, bass, guitar, keyboards), I could become successful even though I was one of the Detroit's top saxophonists in school bands and orchestras and young improvisers of the sax in self-contained groups. But the bass was something special and I knew it would make a mark in history.

Well as I said, because of the state of race relations at the time, it was difficult for me to play rock venues with Thunder Rocks so I was not with this group long and when I left I no longer had access to the bass. By that point, I wanted an electric bass so bad, I could taste it! I wanted an electric bass so bad, "I would steal to get one." I would do anything. In fact, I broke the window of a music store late one night with a friend who had a car to get my first bass guitar. I was dumb. Money was scarce and bass guitars were expensive. We actually got away for about six months, and then my partner with the car went to a pawnshop and pawned his guitar and was busted by the Detroit police. He then busted me! We both did 30 days in the county jail and one year probation. Well that gave me even more of a reason to practice harder and longer.

## Gold Thunder

There was a lot of work available for bass guitarists at the time. It was the now happening instrument with the new, modern sound that would make popular music groove and pulsate with soul touching, body dancing, mind bending energy. It made popular records “sell.” It made people dance! It put the groove in the beat. It made music come alive with life. The bass guitar was a deeply embedded and powerful part of the widely emerging sound of commercial and popular music recordings. The bass guitar was the pulsating foundation of rhythm and melody, propelling all the other musical parts and instruments towards their creative and expressive best. The bass guitar is the life blood and spirit which gives music that special ability to get you to move your body or appreciate a piece of music even to a greater degree.

So I then began to practice by playing along to records learning the bass parts note for note in my bedroom. This is truly when I became enlightened by the playing and sound of **James Jamerson, Chuck Rainey, Duck Dunn**, and other professional bassists on recordings. I couldn't get the sound out of my head. It had me hooked. I practiced day and night. I dreamed of playing on one of those “Gold” records. I practiced so hard that my hands and fingers grew painful calluses, but it had to be done. The calluses were actually needed to get a fat, round, tone from the bass. I played with my fingers instead of a pick which at that time was popular in rock, but, in R&B, the fingers were used to get a more punchy sound.

I knew then even as a young kid that in order to play on a Gold record that I had to become one of the best players around. That didn't bother me as I had developed a great sense of discipline, work and skill from my studies with the

saxophone and other wood-wind instruments. I was already into positive thinking and had achieved success on the saxophone, so I was confident I could master the electric bass. I played with every recording I could get my hands on, as much as I could to learn the instrument.

My first real opportunity was when I was playing in a local band which included, **David Ruffin**, a future Motown "**Temptation**" star singer. We had a couple of common friends who were both great singers and musicians. I bet most of you don't know that David Ruffin played drums. Our friends included in the group were **Melvin Davis**, vocalist/drummer, and **Clyde Wilson** (also known as **Steve Mancha**), **Joe Peel**, and **Ruben Fisher**, all on guitar, with David on vocals and drums and myself on sax. We were playing at an out of town gig winter ski resort in upper Muskegon, Michigan and sounded really good, except we didn't have a bass player. We used two guitars with one of them tuned down to simulate a bass, but it still didn't sound like a real bass. Well since I brought my bass along, and even without an amplifier I could plug it into one of the guitar amplifiers and play, I played the bass. I knew the fundamentals of playing the bass from practicing with records, but this was the real thing. Fortunately, it went well when they let me play on a few songs. They liked it so much that I stopped playing sax in the band and became the bass player in our band, **The Jaywalkers**, the name we had adopted by that time.

Later after this gig I started playing with several blues guitarists and singers in Detroit and Chicago. There was lots of work for an electric bass player because it was the latest



thing in modern sound. I had the chance to play and hone my skills. All the while I was also still playing sax. My final transition came when I was playing sax with **John Lee Hooker** and he asked me to play bass one night because the bass player did not show. Well I played, he loved it and the crowd loved it, and I haven't stopped playing bass since.

The blues club gigs were my entrée into the real world of professional music as a bassist. They also provided a means to make a living with music, although it didn't come without a high price both good and bad. All blues clubs were in rough neighborhoods, with tough beer and wine drinking participants toting guns and knives. You never knew really what was going to happen on any given night. Sometimes two or three fights would break out in a single night and of course they would fight their way towards the bandstand, just like you see in the movies. Be sure to catch *Cadillac Records*. Then there are other side events to watch out for. Let me tell you about a couple!

One night I was playing an East side blues club named Temple Bar. Don't forget I'm still pretty young, 15-16, sneaking into clubs. Sometimes I would cut some hair from my head and glue it on my face as a mustache to look of legal age, but I still looked young. The older musicians would call me young blood. There were these two characters who had been watching me play all night. I am thinking that they are bass fans and are thrilled by the way that I play. The band had quit playing and it was the end of the night.

All these guys are hanging around, which is normal for these blues clubs. I am packing up my gear and putting it

into my car. Yeah, I had made enough by this age to own my own car, not a new one, but a '57 Studebaker white hawk, a very nice car. Anyway, I am driving home and I noticed that I am being followed. I looked in my rear view mirror to get a closer look at whether it might be the police or not, but lo' and behold it was these two guys from the club. I kept my eye on them through turns and noticed they were definitely following me home. I sensed that they were up to no good and wanted to rob me and to take my instruments and equipment to sell. There were two of them so I was getting a little fearful, because I didn't know what they had in mind or if they had weapons in their car. However, this particular night I was prepared, knowing what I'm up against - being alone and young in these tough blues clubs. So they follow me all the way home and I see them pull up some distance behind me. I thought to myself, in order for me to get the upper hand, I must move quickly and get the element of surprise. So as soon as they stopped and turned off their lights, I pulled out my 32 revolver out of the glove compartment, quickly jumped out of my car and headed straight for them with my gun raised and pointed at them, while yelling, "You looking for trouble Motherfucker." Needless to say, I was lucky that night. They sped off never to be seen or heard from again.

Another incident that had "rip off" all over it, was this time I was playing at one of the biggest show club blues gigs. In fact, **Stevie Wonder** was on the show earlier that day. I was working in the house band playing very hard for seven to ten acts. I took the gig because of the people and stars on the show, with no experience with the thieving and conniving concert promoter. At the end of the night, very tired and

## Gold Thunder

hungry, I go to this promoter and asked him for my pittance of a pay. I would play cut rates to get the experience. I don't even think we are talking \$50.00 here. The house was full with paying customers and everyone enjoyed the show. The promoter tells me, "I can't pay you because I didn't make enough money." So I say, "What about all those paying customers, and the rest of the band got paid." I was last to be paid because I was packing up. He pipes up with, "Yes, but with my expenses and all, I just can't pay you." I was already Detroit ready so I pulled my gun and said, "You'd better find it, asshole." He then, pulls a large wad of money from his pocket and reluctantly paid me. I said to him, "You ungrateful bastard, you're lucky I don't shoot your dick or toe off just for spite, goodnight and watch yourself, the next musician may not be as kind as me."