

eric hofbauer quintet

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prehistoric jazz — volume 4

REMEMINISC

ING IN TEMPO

MEMPO

jerry sabatini
curt newton
eric hofbauer
junko fujiwara
todd brunel



the background

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Long before the emergence of a formal “third stream” movement in the mid to late ’50s, the fluid boundary between classical music and jazz (or pre-jazz) was an established fact. Scott Joplin and his forebear Louis Moreau Gottschalk were among the composers who birthed a new American sound, steeped in European Romanticism but also the vernacular of Joplin’s African-American Texas and Missouri, or Gottschalk’s Jewish-Creole New Orleans. After jazz emerged, great innovators such as James P. Johnson and Duke Ellington worked to invent hybrid musical forms and create a space for their music on the symphonic concert stage. In doing so they provoked discussion and debate about jazz’s role in the wider culture that persists in our time.

Against this background, it’s gratifying to see current bandleaders address the hybridity inherent in jazz by dealing with the music of Shostakovich, Webern, Ligeti and Machaut, among others. For Boston-based guitarist Eric Hofbauer, who in recent years has confronted monumental works by Stravinsky, Messiaen and Charles Ives on *Prehistoric Jazz, Vols. 1–3*, the goal was not a melding of genres or a salute to “serious” music in general, but rather a puzzling over matters of timbre and instrumentation, improvisational pathways and harmonic implications specific to these composers. The orchestrations were rigorous yet everywhere was the spark of the

unexpected. Hofbauer’s take on the encounter of European modernism with the America of blues and jazz follows in the best tradition of Joplin, Ellington and all that came after.

“Prehistoric jazz” is a term Leonard Bernstein once used in reference to Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps*. Hofbauer took the concept and ran with it in his account of that piece as well as Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time* and Ives’ *Three Places in New England*. Ives’ Americanness was salient: his appropriation of plantation songs, military marches and other vernacular sources was itself jazz-like. And *Three Places*, inspired as it was by Revolutionary and Civil War monuments as well as natural scenes in and around Ives’ native Connecticut, amounted to a meditation on America’s past and future — something about which jazz has quite a lot to say.

These themes emerge again on *Prehistoric Jazz, Vol. 4*, devoted to Duke Ellington’s 1935 masterpiece *Reminiscing in Tempo* (hereafter RiT). Duke wrote this piece soon after the death of his mother, with whom he was very close — a detail that led Hofbauer to hear this music as a reflection on “memory as a catalyst for change.”

The moving extended work had to fill two 78-rpm records, front and back, so it’s generally spoken of as a four-part extended composition — though as scholar John Howland reveals in his important 2009 study *Ellington Uptown* (Univ. of Michigan Press), the history of the work’s origins is a bit more

ambiguous. In Hofbauer's reading, it unfolds as a continuous piece without timestamps for the different sections, prompting us to hear the music differently. From recorded evidence we know this is true of Ellington's practice when performing RiT live. (Interestingly, Ellington's live performances omit the fourth and final part.)

According to Hofbauer, *Prehistoric Jazz, Vol. 4* "is the closest I've come to employing the technical demands of my solo-guitar conception as heard on the *American* trilogy or *Ghost Frets*, but in the quintet setting." On the solo-guitar recordings he's referring to — *American Vanity* (2002), *American Fear* (2010), *American Grace* (2012) and *Ghost Frets* (2016) — one can hear the mosaic of American traditions that surface in Ellington and Ives as well. Hofbauer's choice of repertoire on these albums is also remarkable, expanding the song canon and with it the idiomatic reach of the instrument. Early jazz landmarks ("West End Blues," "Buddy Bolden's Blues"), not to mention modernist gems (Monk's "Let's Cool One," Eric Dolphy's "Out to Lunch," Andrew Hill's "Black Fire") have sat right alongside "Hot for Teacher" by Van Halen, "The Ghost in You" by The Psychedelic Furs, "All Things Must Pass" by George Harrison, "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" by Tears for Fears and more. The jump from this to deconstructing 20th-century orchestral and chamber music and concert-jazz landmarks might have been bold, but it made perfect sense.

reminiscing in tempo

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"Motivic saturation." These are the words John Howland uses to describe *Reminiscing in Tempo*. Howland explains: "With this term, I refer to the score's perpetual references to a small number of motives. The sophistication of Ellington's manipulation of these motives can be sensed both in the permutational relations that exist between several motives, and in his dense employment of these cells." Hofbauer has gone deep into the piece's inner workings and emerged with a view fairly consonant with Howland's: "Over the years I have picked RiT apart with dozens of composition students of mine in private lessons and seminars. It is my go-to example of almost perfect motivic writing especially in terms of orchestration and variation."

Hofbauer states the first motive alone on guitar, close-miked as always to get the most intimate acoustic-like sound possible from his Guild Artist Award archtop. Then the other members of the quintet enter — trumpeter Jerry Sabatini, clarinetist Todd Brunel, cellist Junko Fujiwara, in that order — and the "motivic saturation" is readily apparent. The ideas start to overlap and spill over. At the center of it all, rippling eighth notes fall and climb through an almost trance-like harmonic sequence, first on clarinet and then cello. Drummer Curt Newton finally enters after 90 seconds or so, adding the explicit element of swing and bringing the tempo into tight focus.

It so happens that when Schuller visited New England Conservatory to guest-conduct the NEC big band, Hofbauer was the guitarist. He recalls: “We were doing an all-Ellington program, Schuller’s own transcriptions of mostly mid-’30s Duke. So I did my homework beforehand and read his book. I knew he was a stickler for the historically correct performance details, so I changed my strings and played without an amp. First rehearsal, during the first song he yells at everyone: wrong drum technique, wrong mutes, wrong reeds on the saxes . . . everyone was wrong ‘except the guitar player, he’s playing this music correctly.’ I was singled out. Total music-nerd embarrassment, but it earned me the opportunity to drive him home after rehearsals a few times that week. The first time I did, he fell asleep and I had no idea where he lived. I hit a pothole, he woke up and said, ‘Oh, turn here.’ A true story and treasured memory.”

After spending time with a work as involved as RiT (“The harmonic richness . . . is at times overwhelming,” declared Schuller), it’s unpleasant to learn that music industry heavyweight John Hammond, in a 1935 *Downbeat* article titled “The Tragedy of Duke Ellington,” attacked RiT as “formless and shallow,” a work of “complete sterility,” “far removed from the simplicity and charm of [Ellington’s] earlier tunes.” One could simply dismiss this sort of arrogance from someone

clearly not qualified to analyze the piece, but the context is worth considering.

Hammond, one of the 20th century’s most important music industry figures, discoverer of everyone from Bessie Smith to Bruce Springsteen, rejected his enormously wealthy upbringing early in life and became an ardent leftist. His opinions on jazz were above all ideological: he loved spirituals, blues and swing as authentic expressions of a romanticized black proletariat; he abhorred the growing phenomenon of concert jazz, typified by Ellington’s longer-form works, as bourgeois, a dilution of jazz’s original rebellious spirit. His objections stemmed from a broader debate about the social meaning of jazz at the dawn of the Swing Era.

Ellington was no doubt affronted but took four years to respond to Hammond publicly. It was “Papa” Jo Jones, legendary drummer of the Count Basie band, who issued the most stinging and concise posthumous rebuke in *Rifftide: The Life and Opinions of Papa Jo Jones* (Univ. of Minnesota Press): “John Hammond came out to Kansas City and came in the hotel, looking for Basie, but he came to my room. I said, John, you frighten me. You’re the great white father of the colored people? I said what about your grandfather, the Kentucky colonel, had slaves and all that?”

“I’m curious about the Hammond story,” says Hofbauer, “because, sadly, it still resonates in the music industry and the jazz world today. There are forces that prefer to

stigmatize work that does not fit into clear stylized definitions. This is counterproductive to creativity, and when there is a subtext in these comments that may be a negative view on race or gender, we all (the artists, fans, “taste-makers” etc.) lose.” When debates still flare up about what is and isn’t jazz, who decides, where is the audience and so forth, we can look back at Ellington as a model of artistic integrity and self-determination, a figure well ahead of his time. Despite all the acrimony at the time of its release, *Reminiscing in Tempo* stands today as a stellar example — and just one example — of Ellington’s unparalleled musical depth as well as his prescience.

“Duke called these types of pieces ‘beyond category,’ right?” Hofbauer muses. “Basically that’s the philosophical genesis of prehistoric jazz as my interpretive approach to arranging

and composing for this project. In particular, the intersection of music languages, techniques and timbres, all synthesized into something personal, not for the sake of novelty or reputation, but because artists who do this simply hear music this way. They hear it all working together even if it defies convention or the social structure of the music business. Maybe that’s why Duke has always been a hero of mine: he had stories he had to tell, he told them through music with personality and honesty, and regardless of them being hits or failures they had conviction, guts and spirit. The modern world could use a refresher course in the value of those . . . values.”

David R. Adler
New York, July 2014

1 reminiscing in tempo ^{24.45}

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prehistoric jazz — volume 4

reminiscing in tempo ^{2 4 . 4 5}

— edward kennedy “duke” ellington
arranged by eric hofbauer

eric hofbauer — guitar

jerry sabatini — trumpet

todd brunel — Bb clarinet & bass clarinet

junko fujiwara — cello

curt newton — drums & percussion

produced by eric hofbauer

(erichofbauer.com)

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cnm030

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