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It was at some point in 2016 or '17 that guitarist/composer Eric Hofbauer began weighing the idea of a long-term, multi-ensemble project in five parts, or books. Each book, he decided, would be comprised of five movements, or chapters. The Chinese philosophical construct of Wu Xing, or Five Elements (also known as Five Agents), was not necessarily on his mind, though he'd long been an informal student of mythology and world religions. It was hard to deny the perfect fit: five books, one for each of the conceptual pillars of Wu Xing: wood, fire, earth, metal, water. For no particular reason, Hofbauer chose water first.

*The Book of Water*, recorded live before a studio audience, is an odyssey for sextet with a freewheeling, improvisatory aesthetic but also rigorous compositional detail. It's the first in a series that is above all for Hofbauer a process of inquiry. "The five agents are not absolutes," he explains, "but their characteristics serve as ways to navigate, organize and explain relationships in nature, between people, in medicine, decorating, design and music. It's about a balance between elements, yin and yang, embracing chaos and order, understanding impermanence and the natural patterns and cycles of all things interconnected. In a way that's exactly what I've spent my entire career trying to do: figure out who I am as an artist and deal with those 'meaning of life' conundrums that humans have valiantly tackled for millennia through religion, art, philosophy, and that have manifested for me in improvised music. The Five Agents seemed like the logical next project, a way to interconnect all my influences and interests while continuing to search and study."

Instrumentation for the remaining Five Agents projects will vary widely, but *The Book of Water* involves a time-honored jazz sextet lineup with three horns: tenor saxophonist Seth Meicht, trombonist Jeb Bishop and trumpeter Jerry Sabatini. “The three of them make a formidable front line,” Hofbauer enthuses. “They immediately had an amazing blend and balance from our first rehearsal and it’s only gotten deeper.” On a superbly polished film of the entire live performance (available exclusively via Bandcamp with the purchase of *The Book of Water* CD or download), you can see the horn players in action, arrayed across from Hofbauer, bassist Nate McBride and drummer Curt Newton. The deftly played parts, the subtle cues and flowing transitions, the exertion of the solos, the intimate focus on sound (particularly from Hofbauer’s close-miked archtop guitar): the way these things translate on film bring the listener that much deeper into the moment.

“Warren Amerman at Rotary Records, my longtime friend and engineer, suggested that we do a ‘house concert’ type of thing,” Hofbauer recalls. “We had some wine and cheese and told people about what they were about to be a part of. Then we played down the piece, and I think both the album and the film capture that extra level or layer of energy that music has when played for people. There is an edge to it, an excitement, especially for jazz where the improviser is encouraged by the community of listeners to take more risk, to dig deeper in the sound and space and not settle for anything less than authentic emotion. We were in that zone.”

Sabatini and Newton share a wealth of common history in the Eric Hofbauer Quintet, the “house band” if you will for Hofbauer’s multi-album *Prehistoric Jazz* series, dealing in exploratory ways with the music of

Messiaen, Stravinsky, Ives and Ellington. Although Bishop and McBride are now based in Boston, they were both influential players in the fertile Chicago scene in recent years, just as Meicht was in Philadelphia and New York. (“A Boston secret, a hidden gem of a monster player in a town full of high-profile tenor masters and teachers,” Hofbauer says of Meicht.) In their interplay one might hear echoes of the loft jazz era, or perhaps the AACM — all part of the band’s collective DNA even as they carve out their own approaches. “There are so many layers of connections between everyone,” Hofbauer remarks, “that the result is a band sound steeped in experience — relaxed, trusting, comfortable and intuitive.”

While *Wu Xing* provides the scaffolding for Hofbauer’s *Five Agents* project as a whole, *The Book of Water* takes its five chapter titles from the poem “Water” by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882):

*The water understands  
Civilization well;  
It wets my foot, but prettily,  
It chills my life, but wittily,  
It is not disconcerted,  
It is not broken-hearted:  
Well used, it decketh joy,  
Adorneth, doubleth joy:  
Ill used, it will destroy,  
In perfect time and measure  
With a face of golden pleasure  
Elegantly destroy.*

It wasn't specifically what Emerson intended, but one can read in "Water" a prescient perspective on climate change and the threat of rising seas. And that's what drew Hofbauer's attention: "Each of my books connect to a major societal issue that is in need of 'movement.' This is not a programmatic piece on climate change, nor is it a call to action per se, but a catalyst for dialogue, for posing questions. My hope upon release is to book concerts in locations that will be or are already threatened by rising water in the next 20 years. There are so many spots in Boston to choose from, and I'm sure in New York and other coastal cities too."

The mood of Emerson's poem also seemed to connect to *The Book of Water*, as Hofbauer observes: "It's uncanny how the lines match up with the pace, feel and emotional space of each part of the piece. Water is a power element — flowing, changing states, placid sometimes, deadly others. We explore those themes in the chapters and Emerson's poem matches almost line by line."

Chapter 1: "This is water as a positive force — it powers the prosperity of the human race, and this part of the suite is upbeat, swinging, with a darting syncopated melody in dialogue with drums and energetic duet conversations in lieu of solo sections."

Chapter 2: "Explores states of water as sound (particularly vapor and ice). The music is sparse with Harmon mute, close harmonies, delicate open strings, harmonics and other extended techniques that are very quiet and fragile."

Chapter 3: "An acknowledgement that water doesn't care, it does what it does. This section has a carefree, funky spare beat, bassline and guitar riffs, unfettered by the 'bubbles' as I call them from the brass. The tenor melody literally rises out of all that, launching into the solos."

Chapter 4: “The ‘well used’ idea manifests in organized parts and sections, the bass ostinato (in five, a little ‘Five Agents’ wink), background riffs, steady groove, a solo based on tonal centers instead of free interaction.”

Chapter 5: “My favorite line, ‘Elegantly destroy.’ If that isn’t a harbinger of how Boston will lose ground to the Atlantic in the coming decades I don’t know what is. I love the word ‘elegantly’ in this line, because unlike human destruction, water will create something new with all the grace and beauty of nature. This part has everything, free blowing, driving swing with changes, polyrhythmic shifts, stylistic mashups (post-Trane into Dixieland for example), ending with a big bombastic finish.”

**There is a traditional way** to compose music using Wu Xing, Hofbauer explains, using modes of the pentatonic scale, although the rules governing this system are well outside his expertise. Rather than attempt to approximate it, Hofbauer relied on his jazz instincts and followed an individual path. Amid the horns’ exuberant thematic shouts and staccato stabs, his guitar functions either as a fourth horn or as a kind of fragmented piano, fleshing out the lines’ harmonic implications. His unaccompanied turn to open Chapter 2 is a study in scrapes, hammered notes, harmonics and other ways of exploiting the guitar’s physical being, all articulated with utmost control, deliberation and feeling. In Chapter 4, beautiful block-chord passages for guitar and horns lead into some of Hofbauer’s most incendiary soloing of the date, alive with the unique touch and tone he has honed to a razor’s edge.

The harmony of *The Book of Water* has a certain sharp, acidic flavor that is viscerally appealing and methodologically involved. Hofbauer notes:

“I used pentatonic scales as ‘pitch sets’ that could be both horizontal (melody) or vertical (harmony). Once you start layering pentatonics in various keys, often related by minor or major thirds, you can start to manipulate the vertical sets to create tension and release, rest and motion like conventional jazz harmony. I wrote the horn lines in that fashion and then also comped using the sets as chords, breaking them down to combinations of fourths, seconds and minor thirds.”

These approaches don’t yield some ideal, finalized form: the wild card of improvisational interplay is at the heart of it all. The result changes with every performance, which is what makes this live, single-take recording all the more special. And yet the next four books will have their own logics, some quite dissimilar. *The Book of Fire* will have Hofbauer on guitar and drum machine and Tony Leva on bass and turntables. *The Book of Metal* will involve a modern chamber group. *The Book of Wood* is solo guitar (along the lines of Hofbauer’s *Ghost Frets* and his *American* trilogy). And *The Book of Earth* is for acoustic string band — guitar, bass, violin and either mandolin or banjo. The projects are in various stages, sure to elicit sounds from Hofbauer the likes of which we’ve not yet heard. Stand by...

David R. Adler  
Athens, Georgia  
September 2018



Seth Meicht

Jeb Bishop

Jerry Sabatini

Curt Newton

Nate McBride

Eric Hofbauer

- 9:54 Chapter 1 Water Understands Civilization Well
- 11:39 Chapter 2 It Wets, It Chills
- 10:26 Chapter 3 It is Not Disconcerted
- 9:42 Chapter 4 Well Used, Adorning Joy
- 16:51 Chapter 5 Ill Used, Will Elegantly Destroy

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