



# Human Resources

Hofbauer/Rosenthal Quartet



Stripped of its common bureaucratic meaning, its evocation of soul-deadening office work, the term Human Resources can have an entirely different ring. In the case of this Boston-based quartet, co-led by guitarist Eric Hofbauer and trumpeter Daniel Rosenthal, Human Resources implies bringing everything you've got to the music. There's a non-hierarchical notion of the jazz ensemble, an ideal of equality, built into the project as well. Four humans, copious resources, and a selfless determination to wield them for the greater creative whole. Completed by bassist Aaron Darrell and drummer Austin McMahan, the Hofbauer Rosenthal Quartet has all the elements in place to make it happen.

Hofbauer's work as a leader has ranged widely, from the free trio improvisation of Pocket Aces to the idiosyncratic solo guitar of Ghost Frets and the American Trilogy, to the revelatory quintet adaptations of Stravinsky, Messiaen, Ives and Ellington in the Prehistoric Jazz series. Human Resources, by contrast, is an album of tunes, unabashedly swinging, somewhat akin to Hofbauer's Infrared Band (Myth Understanding, Level) but with a more intimate and uncommonly vivid acoustic aesthetic. All four players contribute original material.

"I'm drawn to folks who have big ears, no limits, welcoming beliefs, and willingness for sonic adventures," says Hofbauer of his bandmates. "With Dan, Aaron and Austin we have that connection and interest in exploring the intersections, the gray overlapping spots where styles, lexicon, vocabulary, concepts of time and technique are not confined by scene, clique or academic rules about what jazz is or isn't."

That's certainly the case for the in-demand Rosenthal, a Berklee professor of ear training whose activities span a full spectrum from mainstream and avant-garde jazz to Americana, folk and country music (his work with his father, Grammy-nominated bluegrass singer and string player Phil Rosenthal, is worth checking out). "Eric and I started playing together often when I joined Charlie Kohlhase's Explorer's Club about three years ago," says the trumpeter. "We also play together in Ayn Inserto's big band. I really admire the way that he listens and reacts, and the great sonic and rhythmic textures that he can create."

Hofbauer is effusive about the rhythm section, praising Aaron Darrell as “a fellow string player with a deeply personal interpretation of what it means to play time or changes. He is a free player in love with melody and groove, which immediately gives a compositional contour to his playing and of course attaches us at the proverbial hip. Likewise, when he plays tunes he is not confined by the rules: changes dissolve and reappear, pulse becomes multilinear — our duet during ‘Another Gig, Same Egg’ is a great example of us at work in temporal shifting space as the piece moves from inside to out.”

McMahon played drums on Rosenthal’s very first jazz release, *Lines*, a quartet session from 2011. “Austin brings a very crisp and clean, energetic yet tasteful sound to the group,” says the trumpeter. “He is one of the most in-demand straight-ahead jazz drummers in Boston, but also sounds great playing Latin music and free improvisation. His tunes bring a nice contrast to Eric’s and mine: very hummable melodies and some hard-driving rhythms.” For Hofbauer, McMahon is the very ideal of a “deep-listening accompanist”: “Whether I’m comping or soloing, his thoughtful interaction consistently sets up amazing moments of energy and synchronicity.”

From the first moments, Rosenthal’s dynamically sensitive horn and Hofbauer’s warm, close-miked Guild guitar (played with fingers, no pick) combine on *Human Resources* for some of the most absorbingly precise and inventive “heads” to be heard in current jazz. “Nice Weather,” one of four Rosenthal compositions, boasts a unison line that, like many of the themes on *Human Resources*, isn’t exactly a unison line. Hofbauer’s parts are mini-orchestrations, with counter-lines splitting off from the trumpet, or close-voiced chordal or intervallic stabs that flesh out the harmonic and rhythmic logic of the sequence at hand.

The rigor of the concept, and the effortless feel that Rosenthal and Hofbauer bring to it, harks back to the legacy of Bird and Dizzy or more so Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry — an area where the clarity and control of bop and the brash freedom and dissonance of the avant-garde meet. (Rosenthal, for his part, describes “Nice Weather” as having a laid-back ’70s Latin vibe, perhaps with an early Charles Lloyd influence.)

The trumpeter’s “Think of Some,” patterned on the rhythmic skeleton of Thelonious Monk’s “Think of One,” begins with an intricate, atonal 34-bar unison statement before the arrival of the tune’s standard AABA form. The performance has a classic jazz arc: brushes switching to sticks, bass eventually walking, the two frontline players trading fours with McMahon at the end. Hofbauer’s comping, however, bears mention: it’s a pianistic approach, freely inventing sub-melodies or new riffs, or what he calls “polytonal excursions to re-contextualize melodic content,” rather than relying on and repeating conventional chord shapes.

There's a story behind the clever 16-bar "Blues in Keflavik," Rosenthal shares: "I wrote it during an unexpected 24-hour layover in Keflavik, Iceland, on the way back from visiting my sister in Germany. I was by myself and had a whole day, so I wrote in the hotel as a kind of experiment. I usually write at the piano but I just sang this melody and wrote it down and harmonized it." The relatively cheery mood belies the tune's origin in isolation, in the dead of winter no less.

"Sail," Rosenthal's beautiful, tonally ambiguous ballad, contains many subtleties, one of them the guitar/bass unison support line under the opening trumpet melody, and the way that line later changes to trumpet and bass during the guitar solo. "This tune was influenced by Jimmy Giuffrè's writing for the great trio with Jim Hall and Ralph Pena, and later with Bob Brookmeyer, one of my teachers," Rosenthal says. "The solo section has some major-seventh chords moving in minor and major thirds, plus a 10-beat bass line moving in fifths at the end of the form, which the soloist can blow over freely."

"Another Gig, Same Egg," the first of three Hofbauer pieces, is replete with dark harmonic colors over a somewhat ominous 10-beat groove with echoes of Vernell Fournier's classic "Poinciana" feel. The tune has a deep philosophical underpinning, per the composer: "This was written after my close friend and fellow guitarist Garrison Fewell died in 2015. The egg in question is the 'cosmic' egg central to so many mythologies around the world. It's also a name for all the mass in the universe before the big bang. Garrison is now on another plane of energy, another gig, and we are still on the same egg since matter can't be created or destroyed, just changed from one form to another."

The mechanics of this piece uncannily reflect Hofbauer's metaphysical concerns: "The idea of 'beat one' is in constant flux — two meters, or gigs, overlapping on the same pulse, or egg. The melody is in a poly-modal harmonic space; open quartal voicings contrast with whole-step voicings and other dissonances. The call-and-response in the melody is the attempt to communicate between 'gigs.' There is a temporal 'wormhole' as we get into my solo, with Aaron and I playing in multiple tempos or poly-pulses, finally arriving at a free space with no tie to form, pulse or progression. Joseph Campbell or Dante would liken this to the mortal venturing into the 'underworld' to visit the departed. Then we have to find our way back: Austin acts as a guide, I hint at melodic bits, Aaron furtively returns to the vamp and we are out of the astral plane and back to this reality, but with a deeper understanding of how intertwined this world and the next really are."

Hofbauer's "Courting Madness" is named for a James Baldwin quote from the novel Giovanni's Room:

It takes strength to remember, it takes another kind of strength to forget, it takes a hero to do both. People who remember court madness through pain, the pain of the perpetually recurring death of their innocence; people who forget court another kind of madness, the madness of the denial of pain and the hatred of innocence; and the world is mostly divided between madmen who remember and madmen who forget. Heroes are rare.

"It seemed a fitting title in 2017," Hofbauer adds. "In my solo I'm trying to tap into the pacing and rhythms of speech more than 'melodic' phrasing. It's loosely connected to the pitch set of the bass ostinato. The modal harmony is also built from the same pitch set, connected yet contrasting."

"Ornate Context" is of course Hofbauer's paean to Ornette Coleman. "As an homage this piece is all early Ornette in swing and spirit — his earliest albums completely changed me during my teenage years. Dan really lets loose here, bringing in a little more chaos factor and a timbre and tone that leans close to gestural at times, perfect for the spirit of the tune."

"Peddler's Theme," the first of two McMahon compositions, illustrates the drummer's deep affinity for Balkan and Eastern European music. "I find that Spain has music with similar melodic qualities," the drummer notes. "I hear the scale, this particular version that I've decided to work with, as a rich landscape with lots of tension and release built in. This piece is a reflection of my listening habits over the years, but also my collaborations with various groups playing music rooted in Bulgarian, Greek and Macedonian styles, and a touch of klezmer as well. The title is meant to be programmatic: I imagine Gypsies (peddlers) traveling to sell their goods, and this tune could be the musical score to accompany their journeys."

With "Half Full," McMahon turns his attention toward a very particular drum groove, "influenced by the way Elvin Jones plays a mambo with a swing feel. Art Blakey and many others played similar grooves in the late '50s into the '60s. I wanted to find a groove that complements the bass line and generates a different feeling than a two feel or walking swing would. But the groove is undoubtedly part of the canon of jazz drumming, sourced from elements of Afro-Cuban traditions. Switching to walking bass for the trumpet solo was an arranging idea to generate a change of texture and forward momentum."

Finally, Aaron Darrell's "Lisney Dand," a purposeful mangling of "Disneyland," came about at a café in New Haven, Connecticut, while the bassist was reading Robin D.G. Kelly's acclaimed recent biography of Monk. "That book hit me deeply," Darrell says. "I heard the melody for 'Lisney Dand' at some point that day, recalling my perception of Monk's bass motion and harmony. I composed it in my head at the café and wrote it down when I got home."

In the melody one hears very unexpected elongations of rhythm that somehow still lock in with the underlying tempo. "What you hear are odd divisions of 16th notes that give the illusion of a disc skip or glitch," says Darrell. "It's tough for people to learn. You have to be able to flip the beat and start and stop on a dime. It forces the player to adhere to a very strict rhythmic grid full of tempo and feel changes. The idea is for the listener to hear familiarity and history in the melody, chords and tempo, but never remain comfortable in that recognition. The title is sort of an echo of the upside-down circus that the tune can evoke, and a commentary on the Disney enterprise. It's known for wonderful kids' movies, cartoons and theme parks, but there's a dark side: heavily promoting mindless consumption, waste and many other failures and products of greed and deception common among large corporations. And so 'Lisney Dand' pulsates between happiness, joy and familiarity on the one hand, and discomfort and unpleasantness on the other."

Given its improvisational and interpretive mastery, the Hofbauer Rosenthal Quartet is well equipped to shine light on such fundamentally human contradictions. Here are four musical explorers, committed to risk-taking and the cultivation of total trust; each a consummate professional, versatile in his own ingenious way, looking to the whole of music for inspiration. And, again and again, finding it.

David R. Adler

Athens, GA

July 9, 2018

[www.adlermusic.com](http://www.adlermusic.com)

