



Restless as ever, guitarist and composer Eric Hofbauer has returned with a gripping follow-up to *Book of Water*, the inaugural album in his Wu Xing (or Five Agents) series. Yet this new effort, *Book of Fire*, takes a radical sonic and methodological turn. While *Book of Water* found Hofbauer in the thick of a jazz sextet with three horns, playing live in a bracing acoustic format, *Book of Fire* is a stark, by turns meditative and explosive electro-acoustic duet with Anthony Leva on upright bass and turntables that took months to fully conceptualize and record. The contrast couldn't be starker, and the fact that Hofbauer plays not only his customary Guild archtop guitar but also drum machine and sampler (the Akai MPC1000) makes it even more so. For the first time on record, he also uses effects pedals — strategically and sparingly, but with forceful, dramatic results.

Hofbauer's Wu Xing series will ultimately cover every part of the ancient Chinese schematic of the Five Agents, or Five Elements. We've now had water and fire; wood, metal and earth are still to come. Each one speaks to a particular social/political reality in need of "movement," as Hofbauer puts it. *Book of Water* touched on the problem of climate change, and now *Book of Fire* arrives with sobering reflections on racial inequality.

Our narrator, if you will, is the literary giant James Baldwin (in a role akin to that of Ralph Waldo Emerson on *Book of Water*), whose recorded voice enters these duet proceedings at a number of junctures, sounding alternately heartsick or piercingly analytical on the pathology of racism and the uncertain future of human community in the United States. As I write

this, the country is reeling in the aftermath of back-to-back massacres in El Paso and Dayton; the role of the “president” and his backers in creating a climate of anti-immigrant hate is generating pushback more heated than ever before. Hofbauer and Leva couldn’t have predicted it exactly while recording — or could they have? The spoken-word passages on *Book of Fire* are all the more salient at a time when even the halting, uneven progress America has arguably made since Baldwin’s time seems to be lurching into reverse.

Yet Hofbauer and Leva proceed with the hope and determination that the collaborative process represents at its best. From their experience playing on two successive albums by drummer Dylan Jack and his quartet (*Diagrams* and *The Tale of the Twelve-Foot Man*), they discovered their shared formative love of hip-hop in addition to jazz. Talking eventually turned to weekly workshopping and editing and composing of all five “chapters” in this *Book of Fire* suite — 37 concise yet heady and impactful minutes in all.

If guitar-bass duo was familiar terrain, the drum machine and turntables were terra incognita to a degree. Hofbauer and Leva were essentially beginners on these new instruments, but they were willing to put their learning process on display for the listener, proceeding without ego, with the mandate of discovery and expression firmly in view.

That said, Hofbauer and Leva had no intention of using these electronic tools in a “correct” way. “I’m certainly nowhere near a hip-hop producer, I

don't make beats that way, I don't know how," Hofbauer states. "Instead I got together with the drummers I work with frequently — Curt Newton, Dylan Jack and Austin McMahon — and I recorded them. I also recorded some of Tony's bass notes and lines, myself on guitar and also some auxiliary percussion, put it all together into a sequence bank and started creating beats and sounds, chopping up four-bar phrases into other things in odd meters, mixing and matching and layering so basically every drum beat I came up with is like a 'super-drummer' comprised of the grooves and sounds of three of my favorite drummers."

By embracing drum machine and turntables, Hofbauer and Leva might be seen as throwing out the rule book on jazz interplay and aesthetics, but that was not at all what they were after. "I really think the way we're using these tools, the way we composed and structured the use of samples, the way Tony's using the turntables, is very strictly within the jazz legacy and jazz language, like someone playing jazz on a trombone or clarinet. Turntables and samplers, they're just other instruments, being used in a jazz fashion that is so familiar and comfortable for the two of us. So each one, for instance, is featured as a solo instrument, an accompaniment instrument and a rhythm section instrument."

And while some of *Book of Fire* might sound abstract or formless on first listen, Hofbauer insists that "a score for every chapter, written sections always for guitar and for bass as well as instructions and outlines of how to navigate sequences, transitions etc." There are prescribed forms and chord changes, solo sections and other conventional jazz devices, however cloaked they are in a mysterious sonic aura. "Everything is organized, even

the free episodes are purposeful, specifically in the place where they need to be as part of the arrangement and structure. When we're improvising we're keeping in mind the sequence that's coming after, preparing to introduce that pulse of the next drumbeat. The process was a lot longer than even some of my other large-scope pieces. I mapped out the chapters always starting from the bottom up, from the beat floor, from the pulse and groove upwards. From there I would build melodies. One aberration was 'Courting Madness,' a melody that already existed, it's on the album *Human Resources* [by the Hofbauer-Rosenthal Quartet]. In some ways it's my bridge from a very traditional hard-bop sound into this project."

Hofbauer envisioned Chapter 1, "Courting Madness," as a drum-machine vehicle from the start. The acoustic quartet version on *Human Resources* was in fact a "remix" of his original idea, which now gets remixed again for *Book of Fire*. "It's got the strongest tie to what people would call jazz," Hofbauer notes. "Walking bass lines, blues form — it's a blues with a bridge-type solo section that's very difficult to solo and comp through, you have to memorize the strange mixed meter shifts, you've got to nail it as a soloist and get ready for the blues to come back in." The title "Courting Madness" refers to a James Baldwin passage from the novel *Giovanni's Room* — a complex riff about lost innocence and remembering versus forgetting, something we don't hear on *Book on Fire*. But in what we do hear, Baldwin's voice itself becomes a kind of jazz: "His sense of space, his mastery of the dramatic pause, his cadence and patterns are deeply musical," Hofbauer observes. "It's rhythmic, it's got its own kind of groove and swing that fit perfectly with the music. It was serendipitous how

perfectly his text fit with the beats and pulse and integrated immediately.”

In Chapter 2, “Pray for Rain,” the title’s meaning becomes clear in the Baldwin quote at the very end, punctuated by Hofbauer’s bell-like tones in what he calls a “syllabic echo” of the titular three words. It’s the first track to introduce the Catalinbread Echorec delay pedal, which Hofbauer uses in a split-signal fashion: one layer of the pure acoustic guitar sound captured with a clip-on gooseneck condenser mic; the other, brought in at will by a volume pedal, of what he calls the “severely delayed and manipulated” signal from his Traynor tube amp, with spinning sounds and pitch-shifts that bring a whole other dimension to his extended-technique forays and improvised motives. Over this, Baldwin ventures a playful literary-musical analysis of Bessie Smith, in which his use of the word “beat” for a moment becomes part of the actual beat.

“Everything is inked out,” the guitarist says of Chapter 2, “but Tony and I rarely play the notation totally straight. I do this a lot with cellular improvisation, definitely informed by a [Henry] Threadgill type of structure where you have this melody, harmony or groove, and then there are sets improvised variables, so you can repeat a phrase, extend any note, change the rhythm, articulation etc., but you always have to read the pitches in order. It sounds totally improvised yet you can hear themes and phrases that keep coming back: that’s because I’m using the lead sheet more like a springboard to improvised theme and variation, and Tony’s doing the same thing with his counter-melody bass line.”

Chapter 3, “History Is the Present,” is the only movement without Baldwin’s voice, a decision that shifts the dramatic arc “and breaks it

down to this softer, more pensive space,” Hofbauer says, “a duet between turntables and acoustic guitar, the calm before the storm of Chapter Four. I wrote it like a solo guitar piece, a theme and variation on a spare pentatonic melody. We basically go through the melody three times and that’s it.” The female voices are from a 1967 vinyl LP called *Burundi: Musiques Traditionnelles*, specifically the track “‘Akazéhé’ Par Deux Jeunes Filles.” “Pitch-wise,” Hofbauer adds, “there’s a lot of common tones that pop out between my guitar melody and the voices of the *jeunes filles*, which Tony is manipulating on turntables. Again, it was this amazing moment of serendipity: certain pitches, E and D specifically, worked so perfectly and glued the two parts together.”

On Chapter 4, “Something Gives,” Hofbauer raises the temperature with a ZVex Vexter Fuzz Factory that he describes as “a pure chaos pedal,” different from the delay but used in much the same way, with the volume pedal splitting between close-miked and amplified sounds. “There are no instructions for any of the knobs,” Hofbauer says. “Basically trial and error is the only way to use the pedal, so every time I plug it in it’s totally different.” The movement begins with slide guitar (Hofbauer’s trusty Altoids box), “creating this friction in the duality between clean slide and distortion. These distorted moments creep in and overlap with call-and-response until it builds to a noisy crackling crescendo, at which point the beat drops and the sequence starts.”

Along the way we hear Bobby Seale (“...let the people know where it’s at”) in addition to Baldwin; we hear Leva tweaking and scratching everything from an Anthony Braxton record to the searing sound of the

double-reed shennai. And Hofbauer and Leva engage in a round of trading 8's on a blues form, the most traditional of jazz concepts, but in 7/4 with turntables and guitar. "I've got the amp on all the way, cranked, and I'm playing with just my left hand, hammering on while tweaking all the knobs as fast as I can with the right hand, trying to control the distortion and feedback I'm getting out of that pedal, controlling the pitches just enough to interact and play off Tony's scratching improvisations."

Chapter 5, "Terrible and Beautiful," emerges "out of the ashes and the smoke," Hofbauer says, after Chapter Four's enormous energy release. Here is where "things start to rebuild and reform," he continues, "with a new positive but mindful way to move forward." The stage is set with an 18-second sample of Leva's bowed bass, framed by a sparse drum machine beat. "There are elements of the earlier chapters in this chapter," Hofbauer explains. "Certain intervals, harmonies, rhythmic phrases. It veers from high-energy to meditative, open ringing guitar, then fast swing. I take a solo on a very upbeat, strange chopped-up odd-meter beat that I got from Austin McMahon primarily — very dense and driving — and then I have Tony comp for me using both turntables and some big band samples. Again, we're using turntables as a jazz instrument: he's harmonically accompanying me. That was the hardest part of his research, finding the right spots in these records that would fit harmonically with motivic ideas I was working from. It took a lot of practice for both of us, but the result is something we're very excited about — soloist and accompanist interacting in the moment . . . old hat for a duo like sax and piano in jazz, but rebooted and refreshed with this instrumentation."

Baldwin's words in Chapter 5 are from a prepared speech he delivered to young people, imparting wisdom about "the terrible storm that is life, terrible and beautiful, but you must know that it is both." Hofbauer notes that fire, too, is terrible and beautiful, and so for that matter is water ("Ill used, it will destroy," wrote Emerson, as cited in the final chapter title of *Book of Water*). And what of America itself? We're whiplashed from terrible to beautiful every day, practically every hour. At this writing, the administration is meeting with success in its effort to undermine the Fair Housing Act of 1968. A tape has surfaced of future President Reagan, in a 1971 phone chat with President Nixon, referring to African diplomats as monkeys. The country continues to "debate" whether the current president and his ilk are racist, but James Baldwin, and many of his contemporaries and forebears, tried to tell America long ago. Nothing was learned, and here we are.

Beauty can seem scarce, but it is afoot, and the latter part of Chapter 5 taps into it: "There's a sample of me clapping on two and four," Hofbauer reveals, "and on a bright C major 7 chord Tony is sampling high winds from a Stockhausen piece. That long sustained arco bass returns, and also the monks chanting, a type of reflection and meditation, a sound that first occurs in Chapter 1." That ancient, grounded sound, a recording of Tibetan Buddhist tantras purposefully placed in harmonic alignment with these moments in *Book of Fire*, seems at one with Baldwin's message of hard-to-sustain but necessary hope ("I can't be a pessimist because I'm alive," the author once said). "There's this powerful humanist element that flows through Baldwin's writing," Hofbauer maintains, "that should be at the core

of what we mean by equality. We are humans, we are here together, yet there are systems in place that are keeping that big E Equality and big H Humanity from reaching its full potential. Those systems are what Baldwin was so eloquently raging against in his work and life, and he understood that real change has to start with the big S, the self."

David R. Adler
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BOOK OF FIRE

Eric Hofbauer guitar, MPC1000, electronics
Tony Leva acoustic bass, turntables, sampler, electronics

6:24 Chapter 1 Courting Madness
9:25 Chapter 2 Pray For Rain
5:35 Chapter 3 History is The Present
6:57 Chapter 4 Something Gives
8:28 Chapter 5 Terrible and Beautiful

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