

Cull the Heard



Pocket Aces, *Cull the Heard*

In poker, a pair of aces (“pocket aces”) lands you in a most enviable position. “It’s very hard to lose money playing this hand unless you are either very unlucky or a very bad poker player,” according to suntzupoker.com. When it was time for guitarist **Eric Hofbauer**, bassist **Aaron Darrell** and drummer **Curt Newton** to name the trio collaboration they’d been pursuing since 2014, **Pocket Aces** came to mind. “It seemed to fit the sure-thing quality of the group,” Newton remarks. “No matter what direction we pushed, good music kept happening.”

“I like that pocket aces are something secret you hold on to until the end of the hand,” says Hofbauer. “There’s also the term ‘pocket,’ jazz-speak for ‘groove,’ and one could say we are three ‘ace’ (seasoned) players of the so-called ‘rhythm section.’ But here we don’t use much of the expected rhythm section language: we are all melody players all the time, separately occasionally, but most often simultaneously. This is not a guitar trio as one would think of from the jazz tradition. We are equals in all roles, the pockets — grooves, rhythm, time, melodies, improvisation, timbre, you name it.”

Adding a layer to the play-on-words, double meanings and coded language of the band name, Pocket Aces chose to title its debut release ***Cull the Heard***. For Hofbauer this alludes to “distilling the music down to its essential elements and sticking with them via a focused palette of intertwined ideas.”

Though Hofbauer sees Pocket Aces as breaking free of “rhythm section” constraints, the trio did in fact start as a rhythm section, within Charlie Kohlhase’s Explorers Club, a six- to eight-piece ensemble well-regarded around Boston. Kohlhase’s music frequently calls for duo and trio improvisations, and the guitar-bass-drums trio consistently found “sublime improvisational territory,” Newton recalls. It was clear the trio needed to step out on its own.

While they started with a mix of original compositions and tunes by Charlie Parker, Ornette Coleman, Eric Dolphy, and Paul Motian, they’ve increasingly shifted to free improvisation, and it felt right for ***Cull the Heard*** to focus on that. “I think we’re all striving for a deep sense of connectivity,” says Darrell, “the kind that an audience can easily perceive no matter their musical education or concert experience.”

No doubt the musical connectivity stems from mutual admiration, something Hofbauer conveys clear as a bell when discussing his trio mates: “Aaron is the philosopher of the band,

in the true Latin meaning of the word, a lover of wisdom. He is seeking truth through vibration and resonance, through melody and rich sound. It's no wonder he started out as (and still is) an amazing singer. Aaron can work with a three-pitch melody in a 10-minute improvisation and it will be the most entrancing three notes you've ever heard."

Hofbauer's deep simpatico with Newton is part of what makes the guitarist's recent *Prehistoric Jazz* series, featuring adaptations of works by Stravinsky, Messiaen, Ives and Duke Ellington, so riveting and successful. "Curt is my favorite drummer to play with and to listen to as a music lover," says Hofbauer. "I can hear the whole history of jazz in his playing, from the big things like swing feel to the little details of articulation and timbre. But he's not an amalgam of different techniques, he is a stylist with his own individualized conception. He and I both lean toward the idea that time is not fixed, but rather in a multi-dimensional state, with layers of tempo and meter existing simultaneously. Aaron gets in on this too, and the hive mind concept as applied to time and pulse is a trio strength."

While the material on *Cull the Heard* is freely improvised, Newton explains that it's also "consciously compositional." "Some of these tracks emerged from a prior take, grabbing a theme or sound as the new starting point. I think this distillation gives our free playing a strong sense of coherence. Each of us might define an independent rhythmic territory, a cell or cycle, and let the parts slide, collide, and click against one another: tracks like 'Chinook,' for instance. Other times we'll settle into single-pulse mind, like 'Crash Course' or 'Plain Sight.'"

"If there is a tradition we take a page from, it would be akin to the Art Ensemble of Chicago or Instant Composers Pool," says Hofbauer, "but we don't sound like them. We do value the idea of 'instant composition' in that we want to improvise tunes. We develop, deconstruct, and recapitulate forms and melodies just like a written work. We put a premium on timbre, contrast, dynamics, and pulse in a way that can't be easily linked to any given 'style.' Yet everything we do is connected to jazz and blues, those languages are never out of our hearts, spirits or fingers."

"B'mwah," the opener, "a gutsy blues," is a case in point. It's "classic onomatopoeia," Hofbauer comments. "It's the first note of the piece, low F for guitar and bass, and a big crash." Later, there's "Eponymous," with high pizzicato and brushes and a "what will this become?" kind of foreboding, a more explicit tempo than on previous tracks as Hofbauer introduces a melody against a four-note looping bass motive, sparking hypnotic repetition.

“Follow Her, Barefooted,” clearer in tempo still, is solo guitar up front, all “furtive stealth,” shading into “cautious persistence, joyful excitement, a march into the unknown, and more. The choice to go barefoot keeps us grounded, and the pounding vamp drives home that point.” And the closing “Provocateur,” with its from-the-gate free-blowing intensity, highlights every band member before wrapping with a corkscrew guitar melody line and an ending so tight it sounds rehearsed, yet wasn’t.

Listen closely and you’ll hear the offbeat sonic quirks of the Hofbauer guitar. These are extended techniques that Hofbauer has developed mainly in his solo repertoire, on his *American* trilogy as well as *Ghost Frets*. “It’s stuff I can rarely play with most ensembles, but it fits in perfectly in Pocket Aces,” the guitarist says. “Because we focus on nuance of sound and texture, I didn’t have to play loudly, and I could get all those little natural acoustic sounds, overtones, and other strange wood and wire elements that come across so well on a solo record. ‘The Shambles’ is a prepared guitar sound: I thread my business card between the strings near the bridge to get some strange twangy overtones and a spooky banjo sound. On ‘Chinook,’ I’m playing with my right hand behind the bridge to get the tinkly ‘wind chimes’ in one time feel while my left hand is hammering-on the melody. It’s the same technique I employ on ‘Masafir’ from the solo album *Ghost Frets*.” Hofbauer adds that “Chinook” is named for “the chinook wind, a warming wind from down the mountains across the Great Plains. It starts out sparse and desolate developing into something insistent and possibly dramatic.”

With their poker-like ability to turn chance and the unknown to their advantage, Pocket Aces finds ways to foster individual expression while realizing a common purpose, endowing every encounter with deep meaning. “I get this transcendent joy and refreshed sense of life purpose after the last notes have rung out and I open my eyes,” Hofbauer says. “Like I just got closer to answering those big life questions. Contentment, peace, hope, compassion, empathy, those lofty ideals of humanity, all move from my peripheral to my sightline. Rejuvenation: that is our conception and goal. Sometimes playing music is ‘just a gig,’ or sometimes the music is so hard the focus has to be mental, with little room for the heart and spirit. Pocket Aces goes into it with the intention to make each other better, to listen first, to support in risk, trust in the results. It’s a rare treat to play like that.”

David R. Adler
Athens, Georgia
September 2017

1. B'mwah	6:34
2. Chinook	7:01
3. The Shambles	3:42
4. Eponymous	5:36
5. Crash Course	3:46
6. Follow Her, Barefooted	8:05
7. Plain Sight	6:12
8. Provocateur	7:41

**All Compositions by Pocket Aces (Darrell, Hofbauer, Newton)
Produced by Curt Newton, Eric Hofbauer, and Aaron Darrell
Recorded June 18, 2016, mixed & mastered at Dimension Sound Studios
(dimensionsoundstudios.com) by Dan Cardinal
Artwork & Design by Georgia Bowder-Newton
Liner Notes by David Adler (adlermusic.com)**

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