



Although it might not come across instantly, *Period Pieces* is kind of a party record. It's the sound of four musicians rediscovering their close kinship, meeting once again in the studio post-vaccine, delighting in each other's company. "We were all looking to reconnect and have this great creative outburst," says guitarist Eric Hofbauer of the long-awaited improvisatory throwdown with drummer Dylan Jack, trumpeter Jerry Sabatini and bassist Tony Leva. "We played five hours straight, no breaks away from the music. It was so cathartic to play together in person and not be on Zoom or isolated in practice spaces. Everybody had been doing new things on their own, in solitude, experimenting with sounds and techniques." It was time to share the fruits of this strange period, forget any preconceptions or even expectations, and play free, with only the most minimal prior discussion ("let's play slow," "we need something intense").

For this quartet, which happens to match the personnel of the Dylan Jack Quartet (as heard on the Creative Nation releases *Diagrams* and *The Tale of the Twelve-Foot Man*), it was a different way of working. The four went in not intending to play Jack's compositions or anyone else's. This would be an *ex nihilo* affair, a collaboration in which each participant could share what they'd been up to, bending it all to the purpose of collective spontaneous composition.

Hofbauer and Leva have recorded as a duo (*Book of Fire*), as have Hofbauer and Jack (*Remains of Echoes*). *Period Pieces* exists apart from those outings, however; it is not a continuation or return of something prior. It is very much unlike the more structured, beat-oriented turntable and electronic soundscape of *Book of Fire*, although like that album it does involve Hofbauer and Leva continuing to expand their acoustic instrument palette with sonic adventurings, in this context all done extemporaneously.

"We all came in as listeners first, players second," says Hofbauer. In this scenario, improvisation was "not a tool of the soloist," he adds, "but rather a compositional or arranging tool for the group. 'Spontaneous arranging' is maybe a more accurate term than spontaneous composition. It's about recognizing each other's sounds and reacting." The result is a vivid electro-acoustic sound world, rhythmically compelling yet elusive - Hofbauer employs the term "poly-time" to describe the dense yet natural overlap of patterns and metric ideas that occur. Jack adds: "Despite the implied tempo of a piece, there's still a ground beat rooted in an open feel or wide-open quarter note, for example. Subdivisions and meter changes happen within that circle, but the infinity of the open quarter note, or whole note, never leaves."

Another term that surfaces is "post-style" - i.e., a music deeply rooted in jazz practices of collective

improvisation, yet ready to go anywhere, dictated purely by the moment-to-moment creative choices of each player. It could be steeped in jazz language, or a conflagration that sounds, in Hofbauer's words, like Rage Against the Machine playing like Ornette Coleman's Prime Time. Or for that matter Bubber Miley in the '20s playing with Ellington, then looking up to spot a UFO.

The track "Finding Baraka" captures the essence of the approach. Jack discloses that it's the very first improvisation the band played - but it is also parts of the fourth improvisation. There was slicing and dicing involved, and in some ways the editing process was just as collaborative and inspired as the live encounter. The idea, according to Jack, was "to record various combinations of improvised quartets, trios, duos and solos and Frankenstein them together to create musical collages." The solo guitar interlude on "Rational Instability," for example, was originally a separate improvisation, dropped into a slot where it was needed.

"'Baraka,' from the Sufis," Jack elaborates, "means a vessel of some kind through which force flows. This divine gift can be an individual, a place, or even an inanimate tool such as our instruments. The four of us are guiding each other to reach that meditative-like state and express our true selves. This feeling continued throughout the day and even into the post-production process. To me, our first improvisation was our finding of Baraka. It set the tone and it never left the room or our being. You can also hear themes or threads in it - tempo, effects, timbre - that subconsciously make themselves present throughout the whole album."

Jack and Sabatini seem attuned at the minutest level as they begin "Sighs in the Millions." The distinct sizzle of the trumpet and the brushes complement and mirror one another. Picking up and developing the

thread, trumpet and drums play duo in the middle of the tune as well, Jack's brushes skittering as Sabatini veers into extended techniques and broken tones. Jack then assumes the funky drummer role on "Awake-Again," prompting pointed staccato phrasing from Sabatini, who in short order takes the lead with assertive blowing. Yet an unaccompanied wah-wah muted meditation soon follows, limited in range, just a few notes, stretched and molded like putty through motivic variations. The whole piece ends very starkly this way, with Sabatini alone for nearly two and a half minutes. It's similar, in a way, to Leva's solo bass ending on "Restlessness," almost like the gesture of a classical cellist, with a decisive bowed double-stop landing solidly but surprisingly in the key of D.

"A lot of where personality is achieved in improvisation is dealing with time, articulation, timbre and texture," Hofbauer comments. Thus Sabatini finds yet another, more legato wah-mute sound on "With a Purpose," playing duo with guitar until Jack makes a clutch entrance on brushes, right after a pregnant pause three minutes in. In contrast, Sabatini favors a broad open trumpet tone on "Restlessness," meshing with Leva's huge, woody and resonant upright bass tone. Leva works up to dramatic arco frenzies and extended techniques as well, but on the closing "Galumphing Demons" he really goes all out, playing electric bass "tuned C-A-D-G with alligator clips on D and G," he says, "running it all through a bass Micro Synth pedal and some distortion. I was thinking 'trash bass' as I was playing."

Hofbauer also brought an array of pedals for what he calls "a detailed and curated collection of electronic sounds." He kept some up on a small table (Attack Decay, Echorec, Reverb, various distortions) and three on the floor (Ditto Looper, Freeze Sound Retainer and

Lehle volume pedal). As always, he close-miked his Guild archtop guitar for the signature acoustic tone that would remain the underpinning, the root source of even the most distorted sounds (as on "Rational Instability"). He fed the effects, when turned on, to a separate tube amp, rolling them in and out with the volume pedal as desired.

"I use each pedal at least once," he explains, "but rarely do I use them in combination. What one hears is the ever-present crisp acoustic sound on the left, but there's also the clean amp sound here and there, and finally the effects on the right that further manipulate tone and timbre. For instance, I'll pop the Freeze pedal on and off as I play lines, and pick a note in a phrase and grab that, and let it sustain for a couple of seconds, then take my foot off and grab the next one, so you get all this overlapping sustain as the linear melodies continue. I'm enjoying the journey and development of my sound - I feel like it's different from contemporary jazz guitar sounds steeped in delay, chorus and reverb combinations for huge tone. I respect that approach and it certainly holds historic influence, but I've never heard it as 'my voice' on the instrument. I'm interested in unexpected sonic spaces, using pedals in real time, often tweaking knobs on the fly as I'm playing, to blend in surprising colors or textures that become integral elements of improvised ideas. The acoustic jazz sound, which is still at the core of my playing, is augmented but not replaced by the effects. The sonic unpredictability they provide has been really rewarding creatively."

From jump we hear the split-channel stereo separation on "Sighs," the intimate acoustic sound and the left-field electronic tailings that seem to replicate but also broaden and transform the acoustic material as it's being played. Over a loop of backwards

guitar string scrapes and harmonics, rough-edged slide guitar timbres creep into "Tread Lightly," leading to the serendipitous melodic and harmonic development between guitar and trumpet on "With a Purpose." Totally unplanned, this took Hofbauer and Sabatini by surprise. "We created a melodic arc, a harmonic progression and structure that develops so clearly," Hofbauer marvels. "Listening back, we thought, 'Did we just accidentally play some obscure jazz ballad?' We didn't but agreed instead that we collaboratively composed a new one!"

Applying harmonic logic in free situations is central to Hofbauer's work. His big-picture framing device is the Diamond, which he described in the liner notes to *Prehistoric Jazz - Volume 1* as the inter-relationship between four (hence diamond shape) dominant chords built from a diminished 7th arpeggio (ex. C, Eb, Gb, A). Or more bluntly: "The Diamond works on one principle: there are two states of music, rest and motion. I can use Diamond harmony to create or augment rest, and also create and justify motion in response what others are playing. My goal as an improvising harmonic accompanist is to find a type of harmony that will solidify the statement of the melodic voice at any given moment. It's hearing phrases and immediately contextualizing them polyphonically. The Diamond is what helps me as an improvising accompanist to give depth to this idea of rest and motion, especially in free areas untethered to any one tonality."

Jack's responses and ways of feeding off Hofbauer and the others prove key to the album's narrative cohesion as well. His sound, propulsion, textural invention and sheer connectedness and sensitivity within the group comes across as effortless - and given that he was gathered in a room with the full Dylan Jack Quartet lineup, he does a marvelous job

dispensing with any notion of “leading” the session. That’s not to say he holds back, as the immediate burst of energy starting off “Rational Instability” makes clear. (Listen to how Leva responds to the melee by staying fairly sparse, the sparsest of the four.) But it’s also Jack expertly steering the 180-degree mood switch six minutes into “Tread Lightly,” from slow-lingering psychedelia to a quieter rimshot-funk pattern bringing the piece calmly home. These moments are always intuitive, never forced. “One person trying to go another way from what felt natural could have broken the special group dynamic, or the group’s circular rhythm,” Jack notes. “I’m glad I learned very early in the session to stay true.”

Staying true is easier when you’re four musicians filled with “the excitement of getting back to the studio to say all that we have to say to each other,” Hofbauer beams. “That’s what makes it work. When we listen, we hear layers of joyful connection, bubbling throughout everything.”

David Adler



PERIOD PIECES

Eric HOFBAUER guitar, electronics

Dylan JACK drums

Tony LEVA upright & electric bass, electronics

Jerry SABATINI trumpet, euphonium (track 1)

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| 1. Sighs in the Millions | 5:59 |
| 2. Awake-Again | 7:00 |
| 3. Tread Lightly... | 8:36 |
| 4. With a Purpose | 6:58 |
| 5. Rational Instability | 7:30 |
| 6. Finding Baraka | 9:40 |
| 7. Restlessness | 8:58 |
| 8. Galumphing Demons | 5:02 |

All Songs Composed and Arranged by Eric Hofbauer
(Spice-E Music, ASCAP), Dylan Jack (Helmet Cat Music,
ASCAP), Tony Leva (ASCAP/BMI) and Jerry Sabatini (BMI)

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