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GHOST FRETS ERIC HOFBAUER

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Eric Hofbauer, solo guitar

Ghost Frets

CNM029

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Eric Hofbauer plays Guild Guitars. This acoustic recording was done without overdubs and without amplification or effects.

Produced by Eric Hofbauer (erichofbauer.com). Recorded (January 8, 2016), Mixed, and Mastered at The Rotary Records by Warren Amerman (rotaryrecords.com). Cover artwork by Robert Maloney (robert-maloney.com). Photo by Luciano Rossetti © Phocus Agency. Design by Benjamin Shaykin (benjaminshaykin.com). Liner Notes by David Adler (adlermusic.com).

All tracks by Eric Hofbauer (SpiceE Music) except Track 1 & 3 by Garrison Fewell (Ninth World Music), Track 4 by Richard L. Butler & Timothy Butler (EMI Blackwood Music), Track 5 by Joe "King" Oliver, Track 7 by Eric Dolphy (Hal Leonard Corp.), Track 9 by George Harrison (Penny Farthing Music), Track 10 by Thelonious Monk (Thelonious Monk Corp.)



*Dedicated to my dear friend,
fellow six string samurai and "wild-eyed nutcase,"
Garrison Fewell.*



GHOST FRETS ERIC HOFBAUER

FOLLOWING A SPATE OF SOLO GUITAR ALBUMS — *American Vanity* (2002), *American Fear* (2010) and *American Grace* (2012) — the Boston-based artist Eric Hofbauer gravitated away from the solo idiom for a time. Normal music industry frustrations played a role, to be sure, but it was the death in 2015 of fellow guitarist and best friend Garrison Fewell, a frequent presence on Hofbauer's Creative Nation label, that threw his emotional and artistic life into disarray.

Not that Hofbauer stood still, however. In fact, he dove into the demanding work of a quintet series called *Prehistoric Jazz* (the title inspired by an off-the-cuff remark from Leonard Bernstein). On Volume 1 he tackled Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps*, on Volume 2 Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, and on Volume 3 Charles Ives' *Three Places in New England* (liner notes all by yours truly).

As fulfilling as these projects were, Hofbauer felt the need to reckon with solo guitar once again. And the more hours he spent shedding, and the clearer the goal became, he began to perceive Fewell urging him on. "Keep going," he could hear his departed friend say. "This is what you need to do."

Carried along by the momentum of the Ives project, Hofbauer quickly recorded this fourth solo guitar record and called it *Ghost Frets*, employing the initials "GF" for Garrison Fewell and hinting at the Fewell-Hofbauer guitar duo music that will always stay in Hofbauer's ears. (*The Lady of Khartoum*, a duo release from 2006, is a lasting testament to their bond in music and friendship.) "That night in the studio, cutting my tribute to Garrison, it was not a solo recording," Hofbauer wrote in a blog post shortly after the session. "It was duo all the way because his spirit was still pulling MORE out of me than I could on my own."

In his astute liner notes to *American Grace*, Fewell noted how Hofbauer "comments on varied aspects of American society and culture, covering a wide range of styles from '80s pop tunes, jazz standards, bebop and free jazz to country and blues." Fewell also enumerated the skills and creative tendencies on display in the *American* trilogy: "[F]amiliar melodies

reharmonized in unexpected ways, odd-meter phrases of five, seven, nine or seventeen beats that sound perfectly logical, and harmonic form deconstructed and reassembled according to Hofbauer aesthetics that find Ornette Coleman and Robert Johnson in the same tune."

Surveying the *American* discs we find that "Hofbauer aesthetics" encompass everything from Erik Satie to The Velvet Underground, Louis Armstrong to Tears for Fears, Van Halen to Charlie Parker to Andrew Hill, not to mention Hofbauer's compelling original tunes and improvisations. It's a remarkable body of work that has expanded the song canon, and with it the idiomatic reach of the guitar. The jump from this to reimagining 20th-century orchestral and chamber music might have been bold, but it made perfect sense. For these classical masterworks, Hofbauer insists, also share an intrinsic connection, or least a hypothetical one, with the haunting ambiguities of the blues, and thus the American story.

APPROPRIATELY, HOFBAUER LEADS OFF *Ghost Frets* with a Garrison Fewell composition, "Blues Update." Another Fewell piece, "Ayleristic," comes just two tracks later. The former is from Fewell's debut album *A Blue Deeper Than the Blue*, while the latter, a favorite at Fewell-Hofbauer duo gigs, appeared on the first outing of Fewell's Variable Density Sound Orchestra (featuring Hofbauer and the late Roy Campbell, Jr., among others). "These two pieces represent Garrison's 'two periods,' as various writers and reviewers have identified, the 'straightahead' and the so-called 'out,'" says Hofbauer. "What attracted me to both as solo pieces is that they have a strong, concise melodic statements on a short form. They get stuck in your head. Both have the blues at heart, even though 'Blues Update' is on a 16-bar form similar to 'Yesterdays,' 'Beautiful Love' or other swinging minor-key tunes, while 'Ayleristic' is a free, open-time, open-form modal folk melody. That deeper understanding of American jazz building blocks, and how they defy modern delineations of style, was a core belief that Garrison and I shared, and it shaped our collaborations over the years. I wanted to show that there really is no 'in' or 'out' era of his music — both songs are from the same man and his blues lyricism runs through them, especially when interpreted on solo guitar."

There are also four improvised pieces on *Ghost Frets*, three of them in some way related to Fewell's memory. The first, "Masafir," is Arabic for "traveler." "My solo playing has always

explored the roots of American guitar music, which developed from the percussive and rhythmic traditions of West Africa and the Middle East," Hofbauer remarks. "I love extended techniques that transform the instrument into a percussion orchestra. Whereas many modern guitarists find new timbres in electronic effects, I go the opposite way and look for them in the wood and wire of the instrument. 'Masafir' was done in one take, no overdubs — my right hand is playing rhythmic and pitch patterns by plucking the strings behind the bridge while my left is playing pentatonic melodies (all hammer-on technique) on the fretboard. 'Masafir' has a double meaning, in fact: some of these percussive techniques are literally cultural 'travelers' from the Muslim world to the American South, manifesting in African-American blues and jazz. The other meaning pertains to Garrison, who told me all his stories of traveling the world. The most fascinating was the one about his conscientious objection to the Vietnam War and how that led him to live in Afghanistan for two years when he was drafted."

"Scratchedelic," the next improvisation, is not related to Fewell: it's a reflection on "all the hip-hop artists and turntablists I've been listening to in the last several months," Hofbauer reveals. "Kendrick Lamar, Eric B and Rakim and Kid Koala have been getting pretty consistent playtime on my drives and commutes. I love their ability to use layers of surprising sounds and the way the turntable 'scratch' becomes a means to collage completely unrelated events together. It's a sonic surface where two or more sound environments can be in different keys, tempos or meters and still connect. In Kid Koala's music the scratch is also a tool of improvisation. I wanted to explore those roles on guitar too — for example, jumping back and forth from a funky bass line and chord riff to fast solo runs or a walking bass, all linked together by scratching, which is itself an example of motivic repetition."

The third improvisation, "Meet @ Office, Midnight?," is inspired by the weekly meetings Hofbauer and Fewell used to hold at Redbones, a local bar and barbecue joint near Boston. "We would meet to catch up, talk shop and blow off steam," Hofbauer recalls. "All our big plans about tours, gigs and recordings were made in these 'meetings.' So we started referring to the place as 'the office.' This title is typical of a text or email we would send each other to schedule one of these hangs. The music is a conversation between a riff and a chord progression, and as the piece goes on they mingle and new ideas are hatched, just like they used to at the office."

“Sognare di Bergamo” (Italian for “dreaming of Bergamo”), the fourth improvisation, is named for the place where Fewell used to live for four or five months out of the year. “His wife, Emy, is from there,” Hofbauer explains. “They have a cute apartment in Città Alta (the old city on top of the hill), very lovely. I was lucky enough to stay there with them in 2008 when Garrison and I did some playing in Italy together. He loved Bergamo, the culture, and the lifestyle. To me this piece is a dream of happier, simpler, more beautiful times.”

THE INTERSECTION OF JAZZ AND POP, and Hofbauer’s discordant, unorthodox approach to the latter, has proved to be one of the most absorbing facets of his solo guitar output. On *Ghost Frets* both of these currents run deep, and the jazz element ranges from folkloric New Orleans up through Thelonious Monk and Eric Dolphy.

“Buddy Bolden’s Blues,” of the immortal opening lyric “I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say,” grooves and scrapes along in Hofbauer’s treatment, seemingly in-tempo and yet out-of-tempo, the melody not so obviously stated at first. “The historian in me regards this song as a cornerstone in the birth and early development of jazz,” Hofbauer says. “There are two versions near and dear to me. The first one I ever heard was Jelly Roll Morton’s from his *Complete Library of Congress Recordings*. It’s just him playing and singing and telling stories about Buddy Bolden. My other favorite version is from *Air Lore* by Air. Threadgill, Hopkins and McCall maintain the soul and spirit of the tune while updating it with their own postmodern jazz vocabulary and techniques. It is not homage by re-creation but a relevant deconstruction that speaks of the past and the now simultaneously. That was the inspiration for my approach.”

“Let’s Cool One,” a classic of Monk’s, appeared in a duo version on *The Lady of Khartoum*, so the challenge was to harness the improvisational magic that Fewell and Hofbauer used to create on the tune, but sadly without Fewell in the room. Hofbauer transposed it straight away, from E-flat to D-flat, to force a change on the fretboard at the very least. “Before the recording I’d had this idea that form and pulse are malleable and can be shaped and crafted by improvisation. If one can reharmonize chords or reinterpret melodies, why not also alter form in the moment, adding or removing measures, tinkering with harmonic rhythm? It’s been done in ‘free’ music but what about standards? A Monk tune is a perfect vehicle. So this version is a

reverse 'Ornetting' of the music. Whereas a free player will play the composition, then maybe play a solo in an 'open' concept with no changes or form. On this I change the form on the head a great deal, letting the catchy melody hold the tune together as I alter the meter and amount of bars in each section. But in the solo I stick to the 32-bar form for two choruses. I'd like to think Monk would be into that."

Hofbauer played Eric Dolphy's "Mandrake" on *American Vanity*, and here he includes "Out to Lunch," the title track of Dolphy's landmark 1964 Blue Note date. NEA Jazz Master Richard Davis, the bassist on *Out to Lunch*, recruited Hofbauer as an accompanist for bass lessons during the guitarist's years at Oberlin. "I learned so much, I'm so lucky to have had that experience," Hofbauer says. "We would talk about Dolphy often."

On this track perhaps more than any other, Hofbauer conceives of solo guitar as actually a duo of a sort, in terms of orchestral or dynamic contrast, sonic duality, call and response and so forth: "The duo on this track is Dolphy and me. He's been the biggest influence on my guitar playing — I modeled certain aspects of timbre, technique, articulation and phrasing after him. There are three components to the composition that I wanted to highlight: the alto melody, the vibraphone riff and the whole-tone bass line. Those elements play off each other just enough to give a sense of structure. In the solo I was thinking of each instrument — alto, vibes and bass — as a voice to improvise with. It's kind of how they did it on the record too. Each 'voice' in my solo has a role to play: the vibes riff is centering, a reminder of the pulse; the bass provides range; the alto provides the chaos."

In Hofbauer's world it's a short hop from Dolphy to The Psychedelic Furs, represented here with "The Ghost in You" (in heavy rotation on MTV in 1984). "This is a moody song of memory and loss for me, and one of the 'grieving songs' on the record," he says. "I call this a new wave chacarera. The Furs are the new wave part, and I infuse the melody with the Argentine folk pattern of the chacarera. There are mixed meters ($\frac{3}{4}$ and $\frac{5}{4}$ mostly), and the chacarera's classic 2-over-3 clavé comes and goes. Also my reharmonization tends to lift the mood of the piece — the D major chord under a B-flat melody in the chorus, for example, that augmented sound always has a rising quality. It may be a grieving song but the memories are bright and uplifting."

ALL OF HOFBAUER'S SOLO ALBUMS have included at least one slide-guitar number (device of choice: an old Altoids box). This time it's George Harrison's "All Things Must Pass," in a version that Jerry Sabatini, the trumpeter in Hofbauer's quintet, has described as "welding sparks in hot Mississippi mud." It's another grieving song, and also one with an ultimately hopeful message: "I had this lyric, 'the darkness only stays the nighttime/in the morning it will fade away/daylight is good at arriving at the right time/it's not always gonna be this grey,' stuck in my head the week Garrison died. It was like a mantra to help me through. And then the chorus: 'All things must pass/none of life's strings can last/so I must be on my way/to face another day.' It was like Garrison talking to me, one guitarist to another. From that point I knew I'd be playing the song. Immediately I thought of distilling it down to the blues. The trombones and that rising slide sound (pedal steel, I think) convinced me that a solo slide-guitar piece was the best choice."

Although *Ghost Frets* finds Hofbauer alone, both literally and as the surviving partner in an uncommonly deep and meaningful collaboration, the music on the album still resonates with a sense of communal contact. What comes through is not only a great love for the legacies of various musics, but a holding fast to lessons learned while Garrison Fewell was still with us. "We really played as one big guitar," says Hofbauer, "finishing each other's lines and phrases to such a degree that sometimes we didn't quite know who was playing what. You hope for that real human connection every time you pick up your instrument, but it really is rare. A professional musician could go years, maybe their whole career, without finding a kindred spirit like that. Garrison and I were lucky. I was lucky."

DAVID R. ADLER
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