

ERIC HOFBAUER GUITAR DYLAN JACK DRUMS AND PERCUSSION

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ERIC HOFBAUER & DYLAN JACK REMAINS OF ECHOES ERIC HOFBAUER & DYLAN JACK REMAINS OF ECHOES

# REMAINS OF ECHOES





# “IS IT JUST REMAINS OF VIBRATIONS, ECHOES LONG AGO” JIMI HENDRIX, UP FROM THE SKIES

THE TITLE OF THIS ALBUM, SHORTENED FROM THE FULL QUOTATION THAT appears above, was taken from Jimi Hendrix's "Up from the Skies." It's one of the late guitar god's most swinging and jazz-like tunes, but also one of his most strikingly original lyrics, with elusive sci-fi connotations and apocalyptic overtones. To guitarist Eric Hofbauer and drummer Dylan Jack, however, that particular lyrical snippet, abbreviated to *Remains of Echoes*, seemed to pertain to the complex matter of musical ancestry. And that's something these two Boston-area improvisers knew they'd be dealing with in-depth as a duo when they elected to do a full program of covers.

For Hofbauer the time seemed right: he'd recently offered a fully improvised set with the trio Pocket Aces (*Cull the Heard*), a set of originals in a co-led quartet with trumpeter Dan Rosenthal (*Human Resources*), and of course a set of Dylan Jack compositions on the drummer's riveting quartet album *Diagrams*. The goal with *Remains of Echoes* was for Hofbauer and Jack to highlight the formative influences they hold in common, drawing a line



from Ellington to Charlie Parker, Monk to Mingus, Miles to Ornette and Don Cherry. And not only those, but also Hendrix to the Police to Jackson Browne. The particular ways in which they draw that line — the ways in which they generate momentum and strive to summon the elusive essence of each piece — suggests a larger story about artistry in the present, at once haunted and spurred into action by the memory of musical giants.

“This is a concept album of sorts,” Hofbauer says. “We wanted an album entirely of covers, but very specific ones: they’re songs from our mentors or heroes, or songs by bands and composers that influenced us at pivotal moments. They’re stories with a deep narrative connection to our own development as lovers of music. It’s a celebration, a connection with the past, with our musical spirit guides who got us into drumming, into guitar, into improvising. It’s about being part of a continuum in history. So that question from Hendrix — ‘Is it just remains of vibrations, echoes long ago?’ — stuck in my head for a long time, the idea of echoes and reverberations from all of our role models, or our lost loved ones, coming through in songs that have moved and shaped us. And the ‘remains’ of those echoes are simply us, and our interpretations, our playing.”

The “vibrations” Hendrix sings about are also literally musical, as Hofbauer explains: “Strings vibrating, drum heads vibrating, trying to bring out those echoes and the ringing of the past through re-exploration.”

The most effective way to bring about those Hendrixian “vibrations” as a duo, the partners found, was to think in terms of solo playing. Thus Hofbauer describes *Remains of Echoes* as “two solo albums in one.” According to Jack: “My approach on this record was to be a solo percussionist/drummer in order

to get as much music as I could out of the instrument. Whether I was playing melodies, soloing or supporting Eric, I tried to surround his playing with different registers, timbres, density and space.”

For Hofbauer, who has documented his solo-guitar approach extensively on *Ghost Frets* and his *American* trilogy, the duo with Jack was very much a continuation of that discipline, but one requiring a certain emphasis on low-end frequencies. “With the widening high frequencies from the cymbals all the way down to the bass drum,” he recalls, “the music demanded more low-end focus from the guitar as a counterbalance. We definitely have some more open, shimmering and spacious moments, ‘Nardis,’ for example. But on something that’s really pulse- or groove-driven like ‘Walking on the Moon,’ ‘Mopti,’ ‘Word From Bird’ or ‘Fables of Faubus,’ the arrangements demanded a closer examination and utilization of the low end. With Dylan adding pieces to his kit — tuned bass drums and floor toms, also covering bass line-type ostinatos— we worked together to highlight the essence of bass frequency minus the bass.”

On Ellington’s “African Flower,” a.k.a. “Fleurette Africaine,” the historical resonance is profound, harking back to the 1962 Ellington-Mingus-Roach trio summit *Money Jungle* and the feast of timbre and dark tonality those three great pioneers could conjure. Here, Jack rolls marimba mallets on his tom-tom shells, approaching the song in terms of texture rather than timekeeping. He also employs a 12-inch china cymbal on top of the ride cymbal to match specific pitches. “That same cymbal blends well with Eric’s chord choices throughout the tune,” Jack says, “adding unorthodox textures and overtone harmony.” On “Walking on the Moon,” meanwhile, Jack tuned



his drums specifically to Sting's bass notes from the original on *Reggatta de Blanc*. "I used a second bass drum (floor tom converted to a bass drum) to get that long ringing D," he adds.

That same "D" on the floor tom functions as a kind of pedal point on Monk's "Let's Call This." Hofbauer sees a continuity with his version of "Let's Cool One" from *Ghost Frets*, in the sense of letting Monk's melody become the main focus. "I came up with the sparse chord-melody and asked Dylan to react to me and solo through that. We're not concerned about bar lines, though there is a pulse and you can hear the form, but in between phrases we're letting things breathe, and that continues as we improvise together." Hofbauer also notes how in the very last A, when he finally establishes very clear time with an open-string D pedal, he's reversing roles with the bass drum, which had articulated pitch and repetition at the top of the piece.

With "Mopti," a Don Cherry tune from the Old and New Dreams classic *Playing* (an implicit homage, too, to Ed Blackwell), Jack tuned all the drums "except for a small 10-inch tom," he says. "I also included chains on the hi-hat, a rattle on my main bass drum and a small splash cymbal on the floor tom. It added a more intense array of textures, extra attack and some high end. With the drums playing melody throughout, all the extra textures allowed the phrases to cut through." The 12/8 feel and springy bass line are so propulsive, the sound so multilayered, that one could almost mistake it for a larger group. Hofbauer's balancing of melody and bass function, harnessing the spirit of Charlie Haden as he also does on the rare Ornette Coleman gem "Word From Bird" (a *Song X* reissue bonus track), speaks to his command of the guitar in all its orchestral and percussive openness.

Bird's "Klactoveedsedsteene" is an especially lyrical bebop head that "translates nicely into a chord-melody," Hofbauer observes. "I approached the chord-melody from a Wes Montgomery/Jim Hall tradition first, then reharmonized it, then applied a fingerstyle technique to separate out bass and counterpoint lines, chopping things up. We had this idea for Dylan to play an updated version of the 'dropping bombs' technique as a notable homage to Kenny Clarke and Max Roach. But instead of playing steady time and dropping bombs on the snare or kick, we wanted to do a stop-time technique where Dylan freely improvises off strong syncopations in the melody, creating very stark, almost jarring rhythmic drops of the pulse. The B section is more traditional, swinging time and trading off solos. We wanted to take this traditional form and make it an intensely interactive dialogue."

While Miles Davis never recorded "Nardis" himself, Bill Evans' numerous versions were a jumping-off point for the intriguing version here. "This is our nod to the Evans trio with LaFaro and Motian," Hofbauer says. "It's the art of the trio but embedded within that is the art of the soloist, the art of the duo, and the art of space. At the beginning it's pulse with no meter, establishing this idea of floating. When we hit the bridge one hears a metric demarcation of the pulse. In the solo section we're thinking in really long phrases, where seemingly time stops, meters change, and phrases can float and sustain. Doing all of that as a solo guitarist is one thing, but for us to do that together... what a great challenge. It also falls beautifully on the guitar in terms of natural harmonics that ring and add a bell-like shimmer to the arrangement."

"These Days" is something of an outlier in the set — the one unaccompanied solo guitar track, a fragmented slide-guitar rendition of a Jackson Browne



song that Nico covered on her 1967 album *Chelsea Girl*. "Nico's version was my go-to ever since I was a teenager whenever I was feeling down," says Hofbauer, who brings a raw and dirty imperfection to the song, similar in a way to his approach on "Up From the Skies." Just as he previously memorialized his best friend, the late fellow guitarist Garrison Fewell, with George Harrison's "All Things Must Pass" on *Ghost Frets* (also with slide guitar), he offers "These Days" in honor of his father-in-law, who died during the Christmas season in 2017.

"Using slide guitar is a way for me to express that strong emotional pull that always draws me back to the blues," Hofbauer declares. "That expressiveness and that timbre. My father-in-law was a big fan of California bands, especially the Beach Boys and all the artists that were their heirs, including Jackson Browne, so the piece covers a lot of very personal emotional ground. I wanted to celebrate my father-in-law and express my sadness for his loss. It celebrates music that he loved but in a deeply personal way that can help me grieve and honor him." And what better way than a song that includes this eminently musical couplet:

*These days I sit on corner stones  
And count the time in quarter tones to ten, my friend*

Somehow the words evoke the stretching of tonality and pulse, just as Hofbauer and Jack undertake throughout these inspired performances.

The *Remains of Echoes* carry on without end, sometimes searingly personal and vulnerable, but as "Fables of Faubus" reminds us inescapably political: Hofbauer and Jack see the activist impulse of the music as central to what

they're honoring on this album. On *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus* (1960), the bassist derided segregationist Arkansas governor Orval Faubus as "the first, or second or third all-American heel." Hofbauer interjects, "What number heel are we up to now?"

The quip lands with me particularly as a recent transplant from New York to the Deep South: with few exceptions my current elected officials readily qualify as heels in that mold, though they routinely deny and disavow racism. (Faubus, in a 1957 interview with future 60 Minutes star Mike Wallace, emphatically denied being a racist — the exchange is endlessly fascinating, full of fables indeed, with Wallace in sharp form.)

When I hear Hofbauer and Jack play "Fables of Faubus," navigating the tempo shifts and outlining every precise yet lumpy harmony (there's no Eric Dolphy track per se on *Remains of Echoes* but his spirit enters here), I hear the persistent struggle against denial. "That was a long time ago," some say about the racial expulsions and land theft and lynchings that took place not far from where I live now. "Why dredge up old history, ugly memories, old ghosts?" In marked contrast to this avoidance of engagement with the past (for obviously ulterior reasons), Hofbauer and Jack follow the path that improvisers have been taking for decades, communing with old ghosts in pursuit of freedom.

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Athens, Georgia  
January 2019