

eric hofbauer quintet

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prehistoric jazz — volume 3

THREE  
PLACES  
IN NEW  
ENGLAND

jerry sabatini  
curt newton  
eric hofbauer  
junko fujiwara  
todd brunel



## the background

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Long before the emergence of a formal “third stream” movement in the mid to late ’50s, the fluid boundary between classical music and jazz (or pre-jazz) was an established fact. Scott Joplin and his forebear Louis Moreau Gottschalk were among the composers who birthed a new American sound, steeped in European Romanticism but also the vernacular of Joplin’s African-American Texas and Missouri, or Gottschalk’s Jewish-Creole New Orleans.

Against this background it’s gratifying to see young jazz bandleaders of our day reinvent the music of Shostakovich, Webern, Ligeti, Machaut and others. For Boston-based guitarist Eric Hofbauer, who in 2014 confronted monumental works by Stravinsky and Messiaen on *Prehistoric Jazz, Vols. 1 & 2*, the goal was not a melding of genres or a salute to “serious” music in general, but rather a puzzling over matters of timbre and instrumentation, improvisational pathways and harmonic implications specific to these composers and not others. The orchestrations were rigorous yet everywhere was the spark of the unexpected. Hofbauer’s take on the encounter of European modernism with the America of blues and jazz follows in the best tradition of Joplin, James P. Johnson and all that came after.

That holds true once again for *Prehistoric Jazz, Vol. 3*, devoted to Charles Ives’ *Three Places in New England*, a masterpiece of bracing modernism that the Connecticut sage completed in 1914 and revised in 1929. Ives’ sound world — deeply mysterious, irreverent, dissonant in the extreme — is kindred in spirit to the “prehistoric jazz” that Leonard Bernstein once spoke about in Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps*, and that Hofbauer extrapolated on *Prehistoric Jazz, Vol. 2* to include Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time*. Moreover, Ives’ appropriation of plantation songs, military marches and other vernacular sources is itself jazz-like. And *Three Places*, inspired as it is by Revolutionary and Civil War monuments as well as natural scenes in and around Ives’ native Connecticut, amounts to a meditation on America’s past and future — something about which jazz has quite a lot to say.

The mosaic of American traditions in Ives also finds a sort of parallel in Hofbauer’s repertory choices for solo guitar. His solo recordings *American Vanity* (2002), *American Fear* (2010), *American Grace* (2012) and *Ghost Frets* (2016) are remarkable in the way they’ve expanded the song canon, and with it the idiomatic reach of the instrument. Early jazz landmarks (“West End Blues,” “Buddy Bolden’s Blues”), not to mention modernist gems (Monk’s “Let’s Cool One,” Eric Dolphy’s “Out to Lunch,” Andrew Hill’s “Black Fire”) have sat right alongside “Hot for Teacher” by Van Halen,

“The Ghost In You” by The Psychedelic Furs, “All Things Must Pass” by George Harrison, “Everybody Wants to Rule the World” by Tears for Fears and more. The jump from this to deconstructing 20th-century orchestral and chamber music might have been bold, but it made perfect sense.

### **three places in new england**

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There are three examples of what Charles Ives (1874-1954) called “orchestral sets” that dot his oeuvre, and *Three Places in New England* is the first. (John Sinclair’s Naxos recording with the Malmö Symphony Orchestra is a good place to hear all three.) Naturally, *Three Places* is a three-movement work; the first movement is just under nine minutes, the second six minutes and the last roughly four. In this chamber-jazz quintet treatment by Hofbauer, the first two movements grow to an improvisation-heavy 17 minutes, the third to just under six. “I created in each piece a series of guidelines and goals,” Hofbauer explains, “instructions to help keep the improvisations on track and connected to the stories and emotional places of each movement.” As models, Hofbauer cites the streamlined compositional approach of *Kind of Blue* but also various concepts from the Art Ensemble of Chicago and Henry Threadgill.

Perhaps to an even greater extent than the Stravinsky and Messiaen albums, Hofbauer’s *Three Places* benefits from a robust, pure acoustic studio sound and crystal-clear separation of voices. “This piece is about folk music and melodies,” says Hofbauer, “and there needs to be an intimacy at the center of each movement. The acoustic guitar captures that closeness, addressing the American-ness and nostalgia, while also providing a more pointed and percussive attack when needed to highlight the nuanced timbral language of specifically African-American music vocabularies.”

By acoustic guitar, Hofbauer means his main axe, the Guild Artist Award archtop, in this case played largely without amplification. The instrument was isolated “to capture every quiet pluck, every scrape, clang and strum,” he says. Drummer/percussionist Curt Newton was isolated for the same reason, but also so as not to alter the pure acoustic tone of the others. Meanwhile, trumpeter Jerry Sabatini, clarinetist Todd Brunel and cellist Junko Fujiwara played together, close-miked but also with room mics. Marvelously reactive and virtuosic, this band lineup brings the same depth and acuity it displayed on the first two *Prehistoric Jazz* volumes. The studio was in an old converted church with high ceilings and a big, warm sound, providing “a sense of space that’s very important for Ives,” Hofbauer notes.

So what are the “three places” in New England? The first movement, “The ‘St.-Gaudens’ in Boston Common (Col. Shaw and his Colored Regiment)” is named for a bas-relief sculpture by Augustus Saint-Gaudens that commemorates the first African-American unit to fight in the Civil War. The sculpture shows the regiment on the move, departing from Boston Common (the oldest park in the U.S.). Ives’ musical evocation, slow and impossibly haunting, “is not about the sculpture, but about what is depicted in it,” according to Hofbauer. The image even inspired Ives to write the following poem:

*Moving,-Marching-Faces of Souls!  
Marked with generations of pain,  
Part-freers of a Destiny,  
Slowly, restlessly-swaying us on with you  
Towards other Freedom . . .*

*You images of a Divine Law  
Carved in the shadow of a saddened heart--  
Never light abandoned—  
Of an age and of a nation.*

*Above and beyond that compelling mass  
Rises the drum beat of the common-heart  
In the silence of a strange and  
Sounding afterglow  
Moving,-Marching-Faces of Souls!*

“I’ve spent a lot of time at that sculpture,” says Hofbauer, “contemplating its details, the hope, possibility and promise cast in the bronze, and America’s failure to live up to all of that in many ways from then to now. The Civil War is just the backdrop to a much larger narrative of freedom and equality. Ives’ use of a descending minor third motivic idea as the main theme and the building block of every secondary melody foreshadows its use in jazz (think Duke Ellington’s use of it in ‘Harlem Airshaft’) as an elemental expression of the blues. This sonic indicator is an evocative cultural reflection of Black American life and its influence on American culture as a whole. I heard all of that in Ives and decided the best way to transform it was to amplify the blues DNA embedded in the melodic structure of the piece. Ives’ penchant for polytonality is perfect for this modern retelling, as it can speak to our still unsettled issues with race 150 years later.”

In the liner notes to Hofbauer’s previous volumes, I made mention of “the diamond,” a theory developed by Hofbauer that traces harmonic ideas common to so much groundbreaking 20th-century music. In the broadest sense, Hofbauer said, the diamond is “a method to tonally organize chromatic playing and a way to chromatically enhance tonal playing.” In more concrete terms he explained it as “the inter-relationship between four (hence the diamond shape) dominant

chords built from a diminished 7th arpeggio (ex. C, Eb, Gb, A).” In addition, I wrote, the diamond “is part of the very essence of Charles Ives’ music.” So time now to unpack that:

“The harmony [in Ives] is actually quite traditional, I-IV-V-I progressions or variations. He basically uses advanced chord substitutions based on the diminished chord and augmented triad (the diamond). This means tritone substitutions on dominant chords, or playing up a whole step or major third on major or minor chords. However, where Stravinsky or Messiaen might use these ideas in a vertical fashion (chords stacked up in a way that mixes tonalities across the orchestra), Ives uses them in a horizontal fashion. That approach reminds me of Coltrane’s quartet, where McCoy Tyner and Jimmy Garrison would stay in one mode for several bars and Trane would super-impose fast runs in other keys. But with Ives it’s not about fast lines. Ives may have the strings in one tonality (a I-V-I in Bb, for example) for eight bars, while the brass plays a pentatonic folk-like melody in E major and the winds play counterpoint in D major. Take each section alone and the melodies are simple and tonal, but bundle them up together and it is some of the most polytonal dissonance one will hear. It’s the harmonic version of additive rhythm (fixed contrasting rhythmic riffs layered upon each other) found in Count Basie, Latin jazz or James Brown.”

Hofbauer continues: “A quick example is in our version of ‘St. Gaudens’ in the blues guitar solo at the end. The cello is playing a 12-bar blues ostinato à la Willie Dixon in E — as cliché a blues key as you can get. The key centers are all directly from Ives’ original score, by the way. Then I solo in Bb and/or G major. The horns are elsewhere moving between G and E. We all stay in our respective keys for the entire blues form, not just for one or two chords, but for three choruses.”

“Putnam’s Camp” begins at a sprightly marching gait and moves through a welter of dynamic and structural contrast, with snippets of traditional melodies bursting forth all the way (“The British Grenadiers,” hymns, parlor songs, other classical music). This movement is inspired by what is now Putnam Memorial State Park in Redding, western Connecticut, near the New York state border. The park preserves the remains of a winter encampment used by General Israel Putnam and the Continental Army in 1779. “The hardships which the soldiers endured, and the agitation, of a few hot-heads, to break camp and march to the Hartford Assembly for relief, is part of Redding history,” wrote Ives in a program note to accompany the piece. Ives also relates the story of a boy who wandered off in the camp years later during a July 4th picnic, and daydreamed of seeing Putnam and his battalion marching off to the sound of fifes and drums.”

“The boy sees an angel of liberty and hope (white light and all) off in the trees,” Hofbauer says. “This is the part where I play a short [bitonal] solo version of Albert Ayler’s ‘Ghosts’ — an extended quote of sorts, very Ivesian, to serve the narrative while underscoring deeper connections to spiritual music and jazz. Then the boy wakes up as the parade music starts.”

This is just one of a number of jazz quotations introduced by Hofbauer and the band. Their appearance, he explains, “serves as a coded language, using the familiar to invite the listener into the story on a deeper level, often with an elbow to the rib. This is homage, signifying, pop culture courting and more. Quoting in improvisation is as profound a community element of jazz as you can get. The fact is that Ives also uses it, for the same reasons and often with the same results, is striking. It was only logical that we too should incorporate our own jazz-centric quotes into a collective soloing section. It’s a perfect example of the type of improvisational guidelines I used to structure the arrangements. I specified bebop melodies, but any jazz melody would do. There is ‘Rhythm-a-ning,’ ‘Anthropology,’ ‘St. Thomas,’ ‘Blues for Alice’ and a few others layered upon each other.”

Finally, Ives named “The Housatonic at Stockbridge” for the river that runs from western Massachusetts down into Connecticut. Stockbridge is a Massachusetts river town, the same one mentioned by James Taylor in “Sweet Baby James.” Natural beauty is the inspiration here, and Hofbauer uncannily reproduces the distant orchestra effect in the opening with a hushed yet tension-filled arpeggiated figure. “That is direct from the Ives score,” he says. “It’s strings, mostly violins, playing this soft, flowing, rhythmically dense ostinato.” Ives characterized the part as follows: “River mists, leaves in slight breeze river bed — all notes and phrases in upper accompaniment... should interweave in an uneven way, riverside colors, leaves & sounds — not come down on main beat....”

“To execute that,” Hofbauer continues, “I worked up a fingering that allowed for lots of pull-offs and legato phrasing to get that flowing sound. Eventually I depart from the written ostinato and start to deconstruct it. Think of a quiet ‘sheets of sound’ approach to a chromatic postbop pitch set. I even start to phrase more like bop but always return to the original feel. This river has a little attitude, and it ain’t afraid to strut and swing.”

The movement also embeds a hymnal reference and takes its title from a Robert Underwood Johnson poem, the full text of which Ives included in his program note.

Famed conductor Michael Tilson Thomas, who recorded *Three Places* in 1970 with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, revisited the work with the San Francisco Symphony in 2002 and went so far as to add a full choir to the “Housatonic” section. Only some of Johnson’s lines were sung:

*Contented river! in thy dreamy realm —  
The cloudy willow and the plummy elm:*

*Thou beautiful! From every dreamy hill  
What eye but wanders with thee at thy will,*

*Contented river! and yet over-shy  
To mask thy beauty from the eager eye;  
Hast thou a thought to hide from field  
and town?  
In some deep current of the sunlit brown*

*Ah! there’s a restive ripple, and the swift  
Red leaves — September’s firstlings —  
faster drift;*

*Wouldst thou away, dear stream? Come,  
whisper near!  
I also of much resting have a fear:  
Let me to-morrow thy companion be  
By fall and shallow to the adventurous sea!*

Naturally, the poem spoke to Ives — he had strolled along the Housatonic with his wife during their honeymoon in 1908. Hofbauer has visited the area as well, but with over a century intervening he must have seen something very different. “What keeps that movement contemporary,” he says, “is its ability to capture both the tranquility and powerful rage of nature. If you zoom the lens out far enough, in our version those river sounds that build and roil up and clash and clang are climate change, washing away everything to start again with the ‘contented river’ as represented by the stark solo acoustic guitar statement of the theme at the end.”

The thematic unity of *Three Places* is mirrored in a way by the unity of the whole *Prehistoric Jazz* series. Eras and genres collide, metamorphose and nourish each other, and at the heart of it, as Hofbauer says, is “the idea of the past as a shining beacon or solid foundation upon which to continue searching for new perspectives and new sounds. Sounds like jazz to me.”

David R. Adler  
New York, April 2016

**three places in new england** 40.00  
— charles ives  
arranged by eric hofbauer

eric hofbauer — guitar  
jerry sabatini — trumpet  
todd brunel — Bb clarinet & bass clarinet  
junko fujiwara — cello  
curt newton — drums & percussion

produced by eric hofbauer  
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- 1 the 'st. gaudens' in boston common 17.12
- 2 putnam's camp, redding, connecticut 17.00
- 3 the housatonic at stockbridge 5.45

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