



## William Hooker

Jazz's ultimate renegade checks out a few others **BY BRAD COHAN**

**T**his being the “Renegades” issue, it’s an absolute given that you’d find William Hooker here. The prolific drummer, poet, and composer has gone against the grain for nearly half a century and continues to blaze the headiest of trails.

A pillar of the New York City jazz, new-music, and experimental landscapes since the 1970s, Hooker has collaborated with music legends from across the spectrum: Billy Bang, David S. Ware, Roy Campbell, William Parker, Elliott Sharp, Sabir Mateen, and Zeena Parkins, just to name a few. He was also instrumental in bringing improvised music to the independent rock underground; in the late 1980s and ’90s at defunct downtown clubs like the original Knitting Factory, the Cooler, and CBGB, he joined forces with guitarists Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo of Sonic Youth for all-improvised sets. His face lights up when he reminisces about those days. 1994’s *Radiation*, the first out-jazz recording released by the indie-rock label Homestead, remains a seminal document of that era.

Now in his seventies, Hooker shows the spunk of someone half his age as he welcomes me into the Hell’s Kitchen

apartment that he’s lived in with his wife, Donna, for 47 years. After our Before & After session, he’s planning on hitting the gym. There’s no doubt he’s an unstoppable—and positive—force, personally and creatively.

The exuberance that Hooker radiates when talking about his projects is infectious, and he has tons of projects on his plate. He’s still basking in the critical acclaim of his most recent album, *Symphonie of Flowers* (ORG), and the performances in support of it. In the upcoming months, he’ll be bringing what he calls the “*Symphonie* excerpts” to the West Coast on an extensive tour. Some of his earlier recordings have been reissued recently, including his 1977 debut, *... Is Eternal Life* (Superior Viaduct), and 1997’s *Mindfulness* (ORG). He calls the latter “beautiful,” due in part to his son contributing the album artwork.

Hooker also has his own podcast; called *The Lost Generation: Outside the Mainstream*, it’s an interview series devoted to the free-jazz musicians who, like him, came up in the ’70s. He’s now at work on its companion piece, a full-length documentary film. “Where is this society and where is art in terms of giving these people their just due?” he asks. “It’s a story that has to be told.”

As I sit down with Hooker, he’s listening to his own brand-new recording, slated for release later this year. He’s also been in rehearsals for a performance of a new multidisciplinary work titled *TOUCH: Soul and Service*. The third in a series of large-scale projects performed at the downtown Brooklyn venue Roulette (2016’s *EVIDENCE: The Baldwin Suite* and 2018’s *The Great Migration* were the first two), *TOUCH: Soul and Service* is a sprawling work for music, poetry, spoken word, dance, and film directed and composed by Hooker and accompanied by a large ensemble. (Sadly, the piece’s premiere was canceled just prior to our press time due to the COVID-19 outbreak.)

“I try to find creativity in either the ups or the downs of where I am and what I’m trying to do,” he says. “We know that the whole system of funding for art, especially for this work, is rigged. We know it. It’s just obvious. It’s in your face. But what are you supposed to do? I’m gonna quit?”

### 1. Billy Bang

“Yo! Ho Chi Minh Is in the House” (*Vietnam: The Aftermath*, Justin Time). Bang, violin; Ted Daniel, trumpet; John Hicks, piano; Curtis Lundy, bass; Michael Carvin; drums. Recorded in 2001.

**BEFORE:** I could see why you gave me this, because of the Billy Bang experience that I had and the recording I made with him [1996’s *Joy (Within!)*]. This is really a traditional recording by Bang using, obviously, an Asian theme. The things I experienced with him were much more free-form and, I think, exhibited a lot more improvisational spirit, especially after us coming off of a tour of Europe. I think I’m hearing two violins [on this recording], but I’m not sure. It’s very well-recorded music. It just reveals a certain type of Billy Bang experience, and he’s a musician well worth checking out.

## 2. David S. Ware/Apogee

"Prayer" (*Birth of a Being Expanded*, AUM Fidelity). Ware, tenor saxophone; Cooper-Moore, piano; Marc Edwards, drums. Recorded in 1977.

**BEFORE:** We go way back. Interesting recording. Marc plays very well in this as a sideman. He's an intense player and plays with a lot of strength and power.

**You and he seem to be soulmates in sound.**

I think the main thing that he contributed to *Symphonie of Flowers* was a very good vibe, and the ability to work with two percussionists other than myself. The main thing that I can say about him is that he's on his own path, fully in control of his instrument and totally dedicated to the music. As far as I'm concerned, there's nothing other than that that you can ask for from a drummer. I really think that I chose one of the shining lights, in terms of my being able to use him as a musician on *Symphonie of Flowers*, and I'm looking forward to working with him again.

## 3. Gerald Cleaver & Violet Hour

"Pilgrim's Progress" (*Live at Firehouse 12*, Sunnyside). Cleaver, drums; JD Allen, tenor saxophone; Andrew Bishop, bass clarinet, soprano & tenor saxophone; Jeremy Pelt, trumpet; Ben Waltzer, piano; Chris Lightcap, bass. Recorded in 2006.

**BEFORE:** This follows the regular straight-ahead model for a quintet. Solos giving the drum a little taste. What I'm seeing is he's playing eights. What we do is play fours or we play eights, and I could see he's playing eights right there. And that's the introduction to the next soloist, which is kind of cool. But it follows the straight-ahead model.

Turn it up! What I'm hearing also is another thing which I've tried to investigate: the way the drums are recorded. Because, if this is led by a drummer, I can't hear the drummer. I hear a trumpet player and, to be honest with you, I hear the hierarchy of instruments that I've listened to since I was 17: trumpet, piano, bass, drums. That's the way it has been for quite a while, except for things like when you would see a drummer-led group. For example, *Spring* by Tony Williams [Blue Note, 1966], which followed the same sound but the tunes were more exploratory. There was also an adherence to the way that the drums were recorded.

I love it. I love music, period. This is not to rag on these people, don't get me wrong because everybody's gotta do what they gotta do to express themselves—but this follows, for lack of any other term, a traditional model of recording, composition, and structure.

**This is a record led by Gerald Cleaver.**

**AFTER:** I can't hear the drums!

## 4. Miles Davis

"Footprints" (*Miles Smiles*, Columbia). Davis, trumpet; Wayne Shorter, tenor saxophone; Herbie Hancock, piano; Ron Carter, double bass; Tony Williams, drums. Recorded in 1966.

**BEFORE:** Anybody who knows anything about music knows that this is a great album and also knows the interaction that occurred between the tune, the drums, and the trumpet.

**You had sent me a YouTube link of this tune in one of our email exchanges, so I figured this Miles recording of it was important to you.**

I really haven't listened to this in such a long time, but I will say it's a great milestone in Miles' work—and it just shows you how great straight-ahead players can be.

## 5. Irreversible Entanglements

"No Más" (*Who Sent You?*, International Anthem). Camae Ayewa, voice; Keir Neuringer, saxophone; Aquiles Navarro, trumpet; Luke Stewart, double bass; Tchaser Holmes, drums, congas. Recorded in 2019.

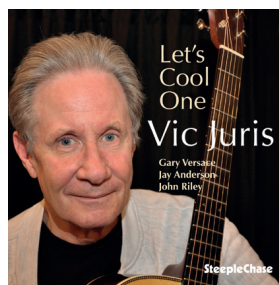
**BEFORE:** I like this one because it's approaching a certain ...

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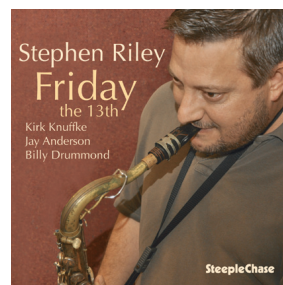
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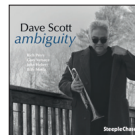
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## BEFORE & AFTER

the structure is a lot different and getting more and more free, which is what I like a bit more. It reminds me more of a ritualistic and ceremonial approach to the music, which for me has to be celebrated more in terms of what we need to actually garner the kind of revolution that we want people to be involved in. All revolutions should have a certain music, and that music should be powerhoused by us to really give people a feeling that they are marching and a feeling that they are ...

[*The bass then takes a prominent role, thrusting forward with urgency*] See? You could feel the impetus moving forward in a very—I won't say in a walking way, but in a ritualistic way, in terms of the dance that they're doing.

[*Ayewa's voice enters, repeating the words "infinite possibilities"*] Oh, I see! Okay, those two words are important. I'm more into the sound of the voice as opposed to what the person is saying because, being a poet myself, I choose to talk in a more abstract way. A lot of times that isn't comprehended that well because of the nature of language and what it takes to make words. But, in my way of thinking, these two right now [the bass and drums] are having a conversation and that conversation is really tight. I like that. This, for me, has more equanimity in terms of the way the composition and the improvisation is revealing itself.

**AFTER:** I'm feeling it! For example, the night that I first brought the premiere of [2019 performance-art project] "Dance with Me" with [dancer] Germaul Barnes, [guitarist] Dave Ross, and myself to [New York club] Nublu, two of the people in Irreversible Entanglements opened up for us: the drummer [Holmes] and the trumpet player [Navarro]. I remember them because we hit it off immediately. I could see that they were really interested in the history of the music. They're just really good people. I also gotta say, of the young bass players, Luke Stewart is probably one of my favorites. We've worked together and toured together, as a matter of fact. He's always there, always positive, always thinking about a bigger picture, and also always trying to play forcefully. He and the drummer are locked into each other with this piece.

I can see that this follows a certain template that many people of the '70s were about. It was about social justice and protest, and I'm glad that they've absorbed that message. I hope people being exposed to Irreversible Entanglements will go back to know their history of where this vibe came into being. The whole Lower East Side was like this and all of St. Marks Place. I like that group! After this I'm gonna have to call up Luke! I knew he had it in him anyway.

### 6. Phonon

"Tamm's Stronic Legacy" (*Alloy*, Zoar). Alvaro Domene, seven-string guitar; Elliott Sharp, eight-string guitar; Colin Marston, bass; Weasel Walter, drums. Recorded in 2019.

**BEFORE:** I like the energy. I see where this is going. It breaks the mold of what people feel is new music and quote-unquote experimental. I see a place in this pantheon of music where it's definitely important that this vibe remain present.

I gotta say, because of the sounds that I'm hearing, I for one want even more diversity and more of a coming out of silos so that this kind of music can be on a bill with myself. I see what the drummer is playing. He seems up to the task. I like this a lot!

**AFTER:** Really? Is this on [Sharp's label] Zoar? They seem like a well-integrated band. I gotta say this about Weasel: I have liked Weasel, not only as a drummer but as a person, for a long time. Sometimes he tries to be harsh but he's not a harsh guy, actually. I've known him since California and he has done things similar to this with Henry Kaiser and Damon Smith. He's around a lot of interesting players that I think he pushes, and they push him.

Elliott also. There are people that are following the Elliott Sharp school—there's no doubt about it in my mind. Elliott is also a very good person, and that's my precursor for being a great musician: being a good person.

### 7. Unnatural Ways

"The Runaway Song" (*The Paranoia Party*, Sleeping Giant Glossolalia). Ava Mendoza, guitar, singing, electronics; Tim Dahl, bass; Sam Ospovat, drums, electronics. Released in 2019.

**BEFORE:** Is this Ava? Ava's my girl!

**I like that record of yours that you did with her and Damon Smith.**

*Remembering* [Astral Spirits, 2018]! Ava and I are born the same day. That's why she's my girl. June 18. Double Gemini, both of us. I know her, especially when she starts singing. I met her in California before she even came here [to New York]. She came into Brooklyn and did her thing—just like everybody else who came from there, like Weasel.

I have a strong feeling for people that leave their environment because it's not feeding them the way their creative spirit has to be fed. It takes a lot to come to a place like New York, the way it is now, as gentrified as it is, trying to make music, trying to play wherever you can, trying to make a living and trying to pay the rent. I really respect that. Without any more said, she could play, ain't no doubt about that. You unleash her, you better be ready for that. That's what it was for me with that record *Remembering*. Seriously!

### 8. Jennifer Curtis & Tyshawn Sorey

"Invisible Ritual: I." (*Invisible Ritual*, Tundra). Jennifer Curtis, violin; Tyshawn Sorey, piano and percussion. Released in 2020.

**BEFORE:** This is an incredibly beautiful record. Huh. Is this Jason Kao Hwang?

**Nope.**

I liked the way the drums were recorded, I like the precision of the drummer in terms of the lane that that drummer is in. I'm not in that person's lane, obviously, and that person is not in my lane, but I definitely respect clarity. But this is another thing: It could be because of the group ethic that that drummer chose to play on that level. I would have brought the drums out more because there's certain things that I want to know a person is doing, especially with the cymbals in relationship to the floor tom, that I think should have been heard in a more pronounced way. But I could see that this particular group has probably played together for a while. I sensed it but I could be wrong.

The violinist sounds very precision-oriented. I didn't feel as if it was getting too, I don't want to say avant-garde, because that's not the right word. You can be avant-garde and be inside. It just so happens that, when people deal with violin, I prefer both inside *and* outside in terms of the purity of the sound and also the ability to go further outside in terms of scraping the strings, the use of the violin sometimes as a mandolin-ish instrument, and to be able to actually play it this way too. They really have facility and, based on the way they chose to present their group, it's very important. That's some sensitive stuff. That's harder to play sometimes than people who play louder. You really do have to play as a group.

**AFTER:** This is really good because you're turning me on to new people that play different styles. I never imagined that Tyshawn would be able to play like that. I wouldn't—at all. That's only two people? The reason why I say that is I hadn't seen Tyshawn play in a long time. But he's in a different lane than me—completely. The point is I could understand its sensitivity and I liked it, but I don't know how long I'd be able to handle that sensitivity for an entire record that's 70 minutes. That's not to diss anybody, but I gotta commend them. I'm really, really glad you're showing me a certain sensitivity, Brad, that you've just revealed yourself as a person to me that is really listening to depthful music.

I'm taking this meeting to another level because that particular piece is really beautiful.

With this new piece that I'm doing [*TOUCH: Soul and Service*], I'm using two violinists in my group: David Soldier and Charlie Burnham. I think, overall, the violin is coming into its own in terms of what we play and what we

do. This is not to sound old, but I'll tell you something: Once you've played with Billy Bang, you have gone to a level that is almost celestial. That colors a lot of what I see, and that's why I chose these two guys to play with me in this, because once [Bang] passed away, he handed the mantle down, and these were the people he chose. **JT**



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