



**ERIC HOFBAUER**  
*American Grace*

Eric Hofbauer, guitar  
Creative Nation CNM 022 (CD). 2012. Creative  
Nation, prod.; Daniel Cantor, mix, mastering.  
DDD? TT: 58:27

**PERFORMANCE** ★★★★★

**SONICS** ★★★★★

Guitarist Eric Hofbauer, cofounder of the Creative Nation label, has become a significant force in Boston's improvised-music scene. With just a Guild arch-top and an earthy, unadorned sound, Hofbauer has blasted away at everything from Charlie Parker, Eric Dolphy, and Andrew Hill to Tears for Fears, a-ha, and Van Halen. His aesthetic evokes old blues, Americana, Tin Pan Alley, bebop, and further frontiers. There's a rule-breaking spirit but also an impeccable rigor, a foundation of sheer chops and knowledge, that put Hofbauer in the top tier of jazz pletrists.

In terms of sound, *American Grace* gets its power from its utter simplicity. The tone is pure and round but edgy, with just enough echo to serve the music. There's a haze of vinyl noise leading off the cagey cover of the Beatles' "Dear Prudence," and cavernous reverb from a struck piano in the closing "Idumea," an 18th-century sacred-harp hymn. But those are the only sonic departures on this zero-overdubs recording.

From the pulsing irregular beat and dissonance of "Kid Justice" to the coarse experimental timbres of "Beat the Drum" and the sparse lyricism of "New American Psalm," Hofbauer's originals fill half the album and cohere into a cinematic story. There's also music by Ornette Coleman ("Peace"), a tune made famous by Cyndi Lauper ("True Colors"), and others, reworked with great depth of feeling and imagination. "West End Blues," the 1928 Hot Five classic, becomes a vehicle for twangy solo virtuosity; Hofbauer, outdoing himself, even plays Louis Armstrong's legendary cornet cadenza to the last detail. —David R. Adler



**MOSTLY OTHER PEOPLE DO THE KILLING**  
*Slippery Rock!*

Peter Evans, piccolo trumpet, trumpet, slide trumpet;  
Jon Irabagon, soprano, soprano, alto,  
tenor saxophones, flute; Moppa Elliott, bass;  
Kevin Shea, drums, percussion  
Hot Cup 123 (CD). 2012. Moppa Elliott, prod.;  
Ryan Streber, eng. DDD? TT: 52:38

**PERFORMANCE** ★★★★★

**SONICS** ★★★★★

I saw this bizarre band, known to its fans as MOPDtK, at the Belgrade Jazz Festival last year. Their midnight concert was an outrageous Dadaist happening, a musical debauch of manic virtuosity and deadpan merriment.

*Slippery Rock!* works because MOPDtK's more organized studio version of mayhem is still mayhem. The album's running joke, tortuously enumerated in the unhinged liner notes attributed to "Leonardo Featherweight" (the great critic Leonard Feather may have stirred in his grave), is that *Slippery Rock!* is MOPDtK's tribute to smooth jazz. There may never have been a band less smooth. All nine of the compositions, by bassist Moppa Elliott, are jagged juxtapositions of incompatible elements. Tempos vacillate. Structures explode. Styles fly by: Albert Ayler, fragmentary bebop, Philip Glass, Kool and the Gang, Haydn. The line between put-on and passion is erased.

Besides laughs, there are exhilarating rushes. Trumpeter Peter Evans burns lines of freakish lyricism into "Can't Tell Shipp from Shohola." Tenor saxophonist Jon Irabagon wildly hammers and vaults across "Sayre." But MOPDtK is not about "solos." Evans and Irabagon have been improvising together for 10 years. Often they seem to be wailing in their own separate worlds, and then you hear that their concurrent hell-raising has aggregated into a grand, improbable design. MOPDtK is a uniquely twisted, skilled, and self-conscious avant-garde jazz band. —Thomas Conrad



**OREGON**  
*Family Tree*

Paul McCandless, soprano saxophone, oboe, bass  
clarinet, flutes; Ralph Towner, classical guitar,  
piano, synthesizer; Glen Moore, bass; Mark  
Walker, drums, hand percussion, drum synthesizer  
CAM Jazz CAM 5046 (CD). 2012. Ermanno Basso,  
Oregon, prods.; Johannes Wohleben, eng. DDD.  
TT: 60:58

**PERFORMANCE** ★★★★★

**SONICS** ★★★★★

Oregon still plays with fire and still sounds like only one band in the world. That signature blend of sonorities comes from Ralph Towner's lush nylon-string guitar, Paul McCandless's keening reeds, and Glen Moore's fluid bass. The tunes, mostly written by Towner, are bracing little hooks traced in tight unisons. Improvisations are planned, concise, and contained within ensemble counterpoint. The solos feel like jazz; the arch, formal decorum feels like classical music; Walker's rhythms feel like world-beat.

The musicianship is unimpeachable. Intricate set pieces like "Bibo Babo," "Julian," and "Carnival Express" are executed with precision. Oregon albums have always been ear candy, and *Family Tree* is wonderfully rich and dynamic and vivid. It was engineered by Johannes Wohleben at Bauer Studios in Ludwigsburg, Germany, where some of the great early ECM albums were recorded.

Given the band's longevity and genuine virtues, there is no pleasure in reporting that Oregon does not wear entirely well. They were innovators in blending genres. They may even be where New Age got the idea (not their fault). But after all these years, Oregon's format can sound pat and the slick arrangements can sound precious. And Paul McCandless, for all his skill, is a problem. His frenetic squealing on soprano saxophone and oboe eventually grates on the nerves. When you're in the mood for mannered, ornate, sonically alluring music, Oregon is perfect. When you're not, Oregon sounds prissy. —Thomas Conrad