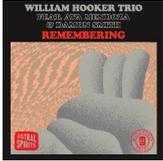


William Hooker Trio - Remembering (2018)

Written by bluesever

Friday, 19 October 2018 13:30 -

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A1 Inevitable Units 6:46 A2 Never In Doubt 5:21 A3 Identical Natures 3:41 A4 The Magistrate 4:51 B1 Grand - I Will 7:02 B2 Barriers To Good 5:15 B3 Figure On A Cinema (Drink) 2:35 William Hooker (drums) Ava Mendoza (guitar) Damon Smith (double bass)

The 2016 NoBusiness reissue of William Hooker's first two albums was a happy turn of events, not only for fans hankering to get their ears on these vital artifacts, but also for a drummer whose career and accomplishments may be undersung even in his historically marginalized corner of the jazz world. But while part of fixing Hooker's place in the free jazz canon might mean looking back toward the past, in 2018 he's anything but done creating and collaborating. Never mind that it's called Remembering — Hooker's latest album, out now on the visionary cassette-based label Astral Spirits, proves that his most exciting music may be yet to come.

Hooker keeps things fresh in part by teaming up with two thrilling younger musicians. Guitarist Ava Mendoza's still nascent discography has seen her thrive in a variety of musical contexts, from folk blues monologues to the heavy prog-jazz of her Unnatural Ways trios. Bridging the generational gap between Hooker and Mendoza is Damon Smith, a bassist whose monster abilities have earned him stage time with free-improv legends like Peter Kowald, John Butcher and Joe McPhee. A gregarious collaborator, Smith's partnerships with both Hooker and Mendoza predate Remembering, though it was Hooker's invitation that brought the three together to record the album live at NYU last March.

At just 36 minutes, it's a relatively compact performance, with each of the three players repeatedly plumbing and recombining a few key gestures — Smith his buzz-saw bowing and blurry-fingered runs, Mendoza her desiccated pick work and distorted classic-rock riffs, Hooker his pounding melodicism and loose grooves. The broad technical range and emotive physicality common to each musician's playing means that hearing any one of them on their own would be

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a completely compelling and satisfying experience. But to suggest that this means that there won't be enough room for them to play together is to underestimate the trio's ability to do what master improvisers do best: listen to each other.

The album begins, in fact, with Hooker and Mendoza listening as Smith tests the waters, without much delay abandoning a springy introductory passage for a viscerally bitter and plaintive arco pattern. At a minute in, Mendoza is the next to join, her brittle plucking like sparks off the bassist's bow. Paying close attention, you can just hear a few booms of Hooker's bass drum as he initiates his own entry and then draws back, perhaps to see where the conversation will go before committing to a point of view. His proper entrance urges the trio to a new, darker place, where down-tuned toms pummel a bedrock of bowed bass through the gritty haze of suspended guitar notes. Before fading out just shy of seven minutes, "Inevitable Units" climaxes with Smith's microtonal croaking, Hooker's beleaguered cymbals and Mendoza's arpeggiated shredding tossing together in a storm of sound raucous enough to obliterate any of the listener's conventional notions of instrumental hierarchy that might have survived up until now.

Though hardly intentional, in many ways it's the trio's play with conventions that suits Remembering especially well to newcomers to free improvisation. Recorded as one continuous, organically developing improvisation, the post-production division of the performance into relatively bite-size, individually titled tracks makes the listening experience more manageable for those not accustomed to marathon free jazz jams. But anyone anticipating "songs" is in for a surprise. Note how the second track, "Never in Doubt," picks up almost where the opener left off, the fade-out setting up and then bucking expectations of predictable variety and album structure. Not that there isn't significant variety across the album's seven tracks, but the listener may have to take a more active role than they're used to in grasping it.

There's a give and take, too, in how Hooker, Smith, and Mendoza inhabit the roles of the standard guitar/bass/drums trio. As "Inevitable Units" makes clear, while Hooker may effectively lead the trio, the group's triangular arrangement is equilateral, with any one of the three as likely as the others to lay out a melodic line, provide rhythmic accompaniment or dazzle with technical displays. While this kind of fluidity can be exciting, it can also be unsettling — fortunately, the trio rewards brave listeners with some seriously satisfying nods to their conventional roles. Special mention goes to Mendoza, who when called on to take the lead doesn't squander the opportunity: Check out her guitar-hero chops on "Never in Doubt" or her absorbing solo feature at the beginning of "Barriers to Good." Even Smith, a restlessly inventive bassist, generally functions as a center of gravity throughout the album, keeping the group grounded. It's Hooker's roomy grooves — like his teasing Afro-Cuban feints on "Identical Natures" or the stomping pulse of "The Magistrate," spilling over with toms — that may provide the best metaphor for the trio's overall approach: It takes up boundaries only to delight in breaking them. ---Eric McDowell, spectrumculture.com

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