



# drummer in the balance

Since the late '70s, drummer **William Hooker** has collaborated with the cream of downtown New York's creative improv scene, from free jazz blowers like David Murray and David S. Ware and out-rockers including Sonic Youth. Thomas Stanley talks with Hooker about his volume, focus, history and methodology. Original photography by Michael Galinsky.

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I first met William Hooker following his 1994 duo performance with violinist Billy Bang at the Knitting Factory's "What is Jazz" festival. While I had heard Bang on several occasions, I had never heard him bow his white electric fiddle with such force or incision. The music hit a very high level and stayed there for what seemed an impossibly long period of time. When I greeted Hooker after the set, he took my hand, the butt of his obligatory post-gig cigarette clenched between his teeth. His eyes were glazed and flushed with adrenaline; his smallish frame was drenched. He mashed my hand absentmindedly, like a stubborn tube of toothpaste, so tightly and for so long I had to pry it loose. "Fuck, this guy is nuts," I thought, not realizing that my clinical assessment and the stinging pain in my right hand were the beginning of a long-standing friendship with the drummer, poet, composer, and bandleader.

William Hooker has seized on every opportunity to play his species of music. Some of the groupings have been improbable, some revolutionary. Building on several collaborations with Sonic Youth guitarists Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo, he has recruited a motley audience of lovers of large music who drift around the fringes of post-punk and free jazz. He has addressed these varied opportunities with a constant commitment to lead by example. Hooker's *The Gift of Tongues* (Knitting Factory, 1995) mates his percussive strokes with Ranaldo's effects-pedal-mangled guitar and Zeena Parkins' mescaline-suggestive electric harp. It must be ranked with Ministry's *In Case You Didn't Feel Like Showing Up (Live)* and Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet* as one of the truly great loud albums of our time. But Hooker bristles at the "loud" label. He couches discussions of his big sound in talk of meditation, quiet walks in the desert, and karmic balance.

I've written about Hooker's art more than I'd like to admit. Much of what I've written about the man and his drums has arisen like an autonomic response, as if his playing were an emetic that had flushed stubborn words out of hiding. In September of 1994, I recorded a 45-minute phone interview for air on WPFW-FM. In that session the physical distance was magnified by the brittle acoustics of a phone feed through the analog busses of my broadcast board. We danced around the edges of the important stuff, staying mostly within the scripted boundaries of our professional roles. That interview was never aired. Several recording reviews, countless concerts, and six years later, William took me up on an offer to visit and continue our discussions. In February of this year, William and his wife Donna rode the bus to DC to check out the museums and to talk about life and music. The vast majority of the quotes here are pulled from the two hours of tape generated between the three of us that brisk Saturday afternoon. Donna is to be credited for helping to keep it real. Her prods from the sideline often helped William deal frankly with particularly sensitive areas. Blended with this material are excerpts from the '94 interview and a handful of follow-up calls.

### Begin.

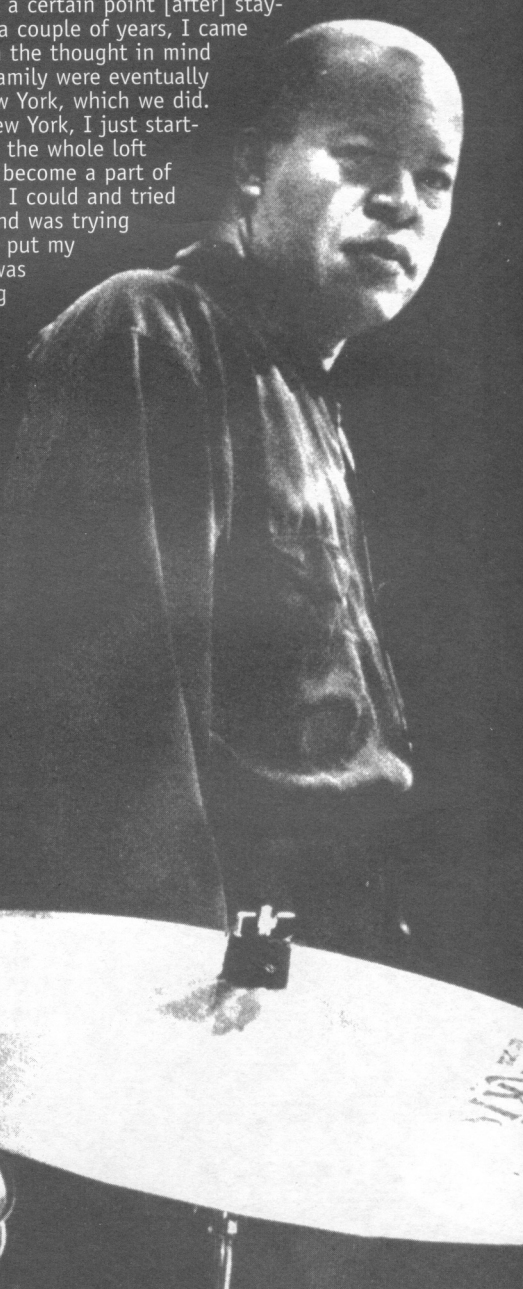
William Hooker: Born in New Britain, Connecticut [June 18, 1946]. Went to school there. Played music. Played all sorts of music, be it everything from rock

and roll to rhythm and blues, to standard traditional jazz, on up to shows. I didn't really go into free jazz. At that time we were just getting our chops together. I was playing in an organ trio to do that. At the same time I was going to school. I went to Central Connecticut State, majoring in political science, sociology and history and graduated.

In Connecticut there was no lack of musical nourishment. William's tutelage as a jazz musician began under the supervision of older men whom Hooker's parents could trust to keep him from drinking while playing the small club dates where he learned the fake book of jazz standards. Al Pitts, a tenor saxophonist, taught young William how to play within the context of a group. Bob Snell, a bass player, was influential in building an awareness of the important organizational skills required to make music happen even on a semi-pro level. The oddest of these biographical footnotes is his childhood friendship with New Haven native Tyrone Lampkin.

"Ty was in between my age and my [younger] sister's age," Hooker reflects with visible discomfort. "Every little thrill we had, we shared. We walked to school everyday. I knew his first wife. You know, the closest friend you've ever had. From the cradle. We all played in the same band." Lampkin would go on to become the drummer for Parliament-Funkadelic, providing an unquestionably jazz-like rhythmic foundation for the Funk Mob during their early formative years. Lampkin died from drug abuse in the mid-seventies. Hooker carried his friend's obituary in his wallet until it disintegrated. He doesn't like talking about it. We move on.

WH: Went from there to California and experienced an awakening out there. Played with some musicians and started playing a little bit freer than I had before. At a certain point [after] staying out there maybe a couple of years, I came back to Hartford with the thought in mind that myself and my family were eventually going to move to New York, which we did. Once we moved to New York, I just started to get involved in the whole loft scene. I just tried to become a part of it. Played as much as I could and tried to get some grants and was trying also to get people to put my music out, but that was like, you know, a long range goal. My major goal was just to play and establish myself. That's kind of what moved me into it. All of this time you have to remember while I was in Connecticut, I was really studying this music. Listening to everything



from about junior high on up and just listening 24 hours a day in many cases. I had a few friends that were poets and they would turn me on to music that we would get, you know, that was really hard to get. And I was ordering a lot of music. Especially the things that were coming out of Delmark, and some of things that were coming out of Actual BYG. That really takes up most of my practical education in terms of why I play what I play and what I've done.

Is *Eternal Life* [1978, Reality Unit Concepts] was my first record. When I got here [NYC], I created a non-profit organization. I was dealing with the people at JCOA [Jazz Composers Orchestra Association], specifically Carla Bley. What happened was I was playing quite a bit and I saw that that was one outlet for me to be able to put the music out. No one had really offered to make a record for me so I knew that I had to do it myself and that's what I did. I went to the government. Got a nonprofit status. Created an organization that was called Reality Unit Concepts dealing with sound primarily. Out of that came a person who felt as if the music was important and gave us some funding, gave us some money to do the record. I got a lot of my friends together and I put together this package that I thought was going to be a great record.

Out of all the playing and the many places that I played, I chose these pieces: I did a solo on Friday, which was done at Columbia University. And then the Trio which featured David Murray and that was at the Cubiculo, the National Shakespearean Theater and then thirdly was a duet which was myself and David Ware, which happened at the Langston Hughes Community Library, which is in Corona. And we ended it with a set that happened at the New York Public Library on 10th Ave. along with a five-minute piece that was excerpted from a special that I did for Channel 30, which is out of Hartford, Connecticut. I went up there with some musicians, one you probably know of — [saxophonist] Jemeel Moondoc. I went up there and we did a half-hour special and I took five minutes from that and I ended the record with that. That's the side and it was done only in vinyl. It went through two pressings, but now those records are really hard to find I think.

#### Tools.

William Hooker: Two cymbals. High-hat. Tom-tom on top of the bass. Bass drum. Floor tom, snare, and that's it. I think that my right is stronger than my left probably because I'm right handed. My right side is stronger than my left side; that probably has to do with parts of the brain. I'm working on trying to deal with the left side because I know that it's very complimentary. That's one reason why I often ask the engineers to mike the left side, because I want them to hear what I'm working on with the left side, realizing it's not just slapping. I try to compensate for it in those kinds of ways. If you're dealing with tom-toms, high-hat, you're dealing with things that aren't as pronounced as this [right] side.

Stylistically, Hooker is his own man. He can sound as if he has wrapped all four limbs around his drum kit and shaken it like a shaman's rattle. When

he opens up, the motion is constant. Cadence and tempo are introduced sparsely. The kick pedal can sound as if it's being pumped with both feet and against — not with — the dominant pulse. Rolls are extended and spread around until they take on an unearthly drone. Drums liberated from rhythm only to rediscover it infrequently and in its most primal form. Drummer confronting Drummer's Body with a gilded whip.

I was at the concert where *Gift of Tongues* was cut. Rinaldo and Parkins each summoned a towering presence from their amplified strings. Hooker leaned into this power with a determination to outflank the combined voltage. This he accomplished, not so much by playing loudly, but constantly, and very fast. There was a wind rushing off the stage like so many neutrinos tearing through my body. As the ritual commenced, a man sitting a few seats in front of me politely grabbed his coat and made for the relative calm of Manhattan streets. William has described himself as a "loud" drummer.

WH: O.K., I'm loud, huh? That was the wrong word. I didn't really mean loud. I probably meant loud in comparison with what I hear in other contexts. For what I do, I'm not loud. If I was just to play with a bass player, I might be thought to be loud. But for me it's appropriate. Within the course of let's say fifty minutes to an hour, a lot of things happen. But to just focus on

what's jarring, what's loud... I know for a fact that every time I get ready to play I have places where I don't want to just play loud. I have places where I want to use brushes or mallets. But it just lets me know that they weren't really focusing on the whole thing. I don't know why people do that. I don't know why they do that. Especially when you got fifty-five minutes, right, nobody can play totally full on. It's like bench-pressing 500 pounds for fifty-minutes. Nobody's going to do that.

It's definitely not relaxation. I may approach it in a relaxed way. So that I say to myself, if I'm going to play for an hour and fifteen minutes I hope I'm not going to be too nervous and drop sticks and do various things and get out of wind and do all that kind of stuff. When you hit, it's really a trip in a way. A lot of times you really don't know what's going to happen. You almost try to control, not to control yourself, no. You try to gauge yourself so that you don't become too exhausted at any point or you don't become too out of control. So that you're still doing something that is musical. You're not just up there banging your brains out or having a fit. I think that takes a certain amount of tension to be able to do that and to be conscious of where you are while you're performing.

#### Inspirations.

WH: You find yourself in certain contexts, in certain places. You like tune into things and you tune out other things. I guess when I was in the desert the thing that profoundly hit me was when I saw an electrical storm. It was as if this storm was happening and there was no thunder and there was no rain. And then you go sometimes let's say to Cape Cod or Newport or someplace and you sit and listen to the ocean and that has its own quality about it. Sometimes you just listen to silence in the middle of the night perhaps, that kind of thing. I don't know, I guess I'm just trying to find that place inside myself. I guess a lot of people are trying to find where you can just relax and just feel comfortable with what's going on around you just for a minute. Sometimes it transfers into music and sometimes the instruments that are played spark off their own thing. And it's come out of just being by myself and singing to myself a lot of times and just dealing with the subtle things that silence can bring on. It's two things: It's the physical manifestation and the more subtle manifestation and how they work off of each other.

We've come here with certain traditions that we know are beautiful and certain ways of looking at what brought us here and what places the music where it is now, dealing with all the masters that have produced it before us. We're still dealing with their contributions, and dealing with the fact that we know where it's come from, we know that it's part of a continuum that we hope will be recognized for what it is.

#### The Plan.

WH: There's always a plan. There's always a plan. Even if you wrote out a plan, if you play with the same people just by virtue of the fact that they're into their habits, they're just going to eventually do what they do. Which is cool because I know what certain people do. Which means that if I need somebody to do something, I'll just ask for what they do, but I don't want them to do it all the time. That's kind of boring.

Talking to William you can get the feeling that his whole artistic life has been charted out on huge maps in some hidden situation room. That every catlike move is part of a grand scheme, the scale of which can only be fully realized by those privileged to see the maps. It's hard to identify discontinuity in a career that encompasses such a disparate array of collaborators and recording labels. On the one hand there's been no consistent William Hooker Ensemble. On the other hand, William confesses that there's always been a cadre of players that follow his music and method. "I really do have a group," he seems relieved to announce forty-minutes after brushing off the need for such encumbrances. "I've played with Flip [Lewis Barnes, trumpet], Blaise [Siwula, sax], Charles [Compo, sax] who took Richard Keane's place, Mark Hennen [piano]. Off and on Jesse [Henry, guitar] has definitely been the man in there along with Doug Walker [electronics]. I've played with these guys for like fifteen, twenty years. They've played on many of my albums. And if you really think about it, I tried the sextet for a long time. I say this because, after working with the sextet for that long period of time and seeing how difficult it was to get work. It was a hard thing. Not that many people showed interest, I think because it was really hardcore. But that is my group. I haven't been out there by myself. Basically they have memorized my music."

The plan also entails pushing his music out in front of a fickle audience with the persistence of an angler offering worms. Eventually the fish will bite, but you'd better have a line in the water when they do, and there better be fresh bait on the hook. So he releases a lot of albums, most of them remarkably well produced for the budgets they've been allocated. Several of them are nothing short of gems. These releases have popped up on a splattering of labels with Knitting Factory, Silkheart and Homestead able to claim several titles each.

Of course, to support all those releases there's a constant demand to perform. In and outside of New York, William continues to surprise audiences by changing the instrumentation, personnel, and context that surround his playing. Spoken word, whether his own or that of invited scribes, is almost always a part of the mix. But regardless of the accompaniment, the common thread to all these performances is William's leadership.

WH: A lot of times I don't really feel like I'm one of the people playing. All right, you have a band. You have five people all playing together, right. Now, I know the song, because I wrote the song. I don't have to play the song if I don't want to. If I choose to just like hit one thing, that would be me playing the tune. Usually what I'm trying to do is play the song as I see it in relationship to the other people that are more tied to the music. I'm not necessarily tied to the music just by virtue of the fact [that] that's the position I put myself in. I always feel as if I'm playing with other people, but I can be an expressionist or I can interpret it anyway I want to, because I know it. The other players don't have that luxury. They don't. And in my doing that, I don't necessarily have to approach the kit in any orthodox way at all. I've freed myself from any orthodoxy other than constraints in my own head.

That's one thing that I think is very important like when I look at Miles. I don't compare myself to him at all, but every single record that he makes, that's the only person that you ever see on the cover. You don't see anybody else's picture. [laughs] I'm saying that because that's who he is. Certain groups have propelled him into another direction, which is good, but this thing of one group, I don't like that. I'm just not that kind of a person. In terms of the artistic way of looking at it, in terms of the people, that has never worked for me. And as far as I can see, once people reach a certain level, I don't want to really have them be under me. I can't even say 'under me'. I don't want to be the leader. I can't do what I should be doing for that group as a whole. If I play with somebody and I don't have to deal with the whole thing of the way the world perceives music to be, I can go in and I can get the gig, I can book the gig, I can do whatever I like with the lights, I can do whatever I want with the documentation of it. I can have it set up any way I want to. A lot of times you get in these situations and people become really a pain. I don't like that. I really like the fact that in most of my situations I've been in control of what I've been doing. That's important for me. For a lot of people, that's not that important. They just want to come up and play, if they have great players with them that's fine. But they're not thinking about the performance as such, the performance space as such. If I have to just sit and bicker with other musicians about what's going on, that takes a lot of the pleasure away for me. I don't particularly care for it to be done that way.

Ornette Coleman said to me one day, he said that the reason why a lot of people aren't catching what I'm doing is because they're listening to tunes, they're not listening to concepts. I was playing ideas, he said. 'You're playing ideas, you're not playing tunes.' When a person plays concepts, you don't expect this thing of like a beginning, the head, the middle, the end. You have to approach listening to it in a different way. I approach playing it in a different way.

## Overcome Resistance.

Consistent in William's take on the player's life is a thinly veiled bitterness towards the constellation of institutions that make up the Music Business. As if the disparities in the treatment of musicians and their product could be whittled away by bold and unapologetic activism (and who's to say they can't), William rails on against the impediments presented by jaded and corrupt gatekeepers.

WH: Well I think this: I think if you put people in a ring, you don't put anybody in a ring with his hands tied behind his back. It just so happens that you can't play catch-up in a lot of these situations. So because of that, it's either all or nothing. A person either gets all of the money or they get none of the money. They either get the gig or they don't get the gig. It's not like everything is being fairly distributed, what's out there for production, what's out there for gigs, what's out there for all those things. Those people realizing that they're catering to the least common denominator, it all just goes toward the least common denominator. Which in my way of thinking isn't necessarily artistically correct. Not at all. It's ridiculous. They don't even know of me. If they don't even know of me how can they make a judgment. My whole thing is to make them aware of what's going on, to let them know what's going on. To give them a choice, they don't have a choice as far as I can see. They're just being spoon-fed and that's it. Time is on our side, but I don't know about time in terms of what you're seeing in this generation that is now. I don't know how long this will take. But time is strange. All this may be my homework. Are the numbers in our favor? You turn on television. You got eight million stations. If you can get music for an hour in a week, you're lucky. And they keep adding more and more stations. What's on these stations? I think you have to bombard people with it. People forget. You have to remind on a mass level, then they'll wake up and say, 'oh wow, guess what'. But it was there all along.

As it stands now the problems are becoming less of a problem. And this I am very thankful about. I say thankful because I've been through, well myself and a lot of people have gone through a lot of hard times with this music. There's no two ways about it. We've been doing it for a while. Now I'm almost feeling relieved in a way. Relieved because it's not the same kind of battle. I mean, I don't have to get up at five-o'clock in the morning and wheatpaste fliers all over the place anymore. I'm sure that there's places to go with this, but I'm just thankful that it's gone this far, because I never thought that I would be doing some of the things that I'm doing now. That's the basis for my being thankful. I never really thought that certain things would ever happen. I just didn't have it in me to believe that. The opportunities have just been happening and the music just keeps coming, so I'm really sincerely happy about that. Because that keeps me positive in a way, because, you've known when times were real-

ly rougher, you've know when times were really terrible. I can't complain about that too much. I don't have any manager. I don't have any publicist. I don't have people to do all these things for me that they would do on a major label or whatever. I don't strategize that much about it. It's almost like a waste of energy in a way.

I feel that I have a lot more to say. I could be happy right now with the fact that I think I have a very great body of work. I think I've put out some great records. I'm talking about the entire package when they open it up. First off, it thrills me that my son's [Yureesh Hooker] artwork is on most of these records. His artwork stands out more than the people who quote-unquote do artwork for records. Now that to me is an accomplishment, number one. When they open it up and they read what some of these people have written. There's a lot of them and I think they're really well made records. I can really be happy in saying that if it ended today, I'd be happy. I could be happy with that. But there's so many more, Thomas, there's so many more.

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## The Challenge

I don't feel responsible for other people's feelings. I feel responsible for my own feelings. If I got off, hopefully the person I played for got off. And that will be enough impetus for them to be stimulated to go in whatever direction they feel this is supposed to go for them. For me, all I'm caring about is me getting off. You've seen it. All right then. It's just a state of blindness. It's a state of consciousness where for a while there, things stop. That's kind of it. That's a good place, a good starting point. I can't ask for more than that.

The ability to break through to a level that is a certain consciousness, that has a certain clarity about things. So that you are hearing and acting as soon as you hear. I was going to talk about meditation, but that wouldn't make too much sense in this context. I really think that a person has to have a certain mindfulness to be this way or to even get better at this. You can't just be cloudy, wandering around thinking that you're going to be able to react when it happens. You can't do that. I mean, I can't do it. That's important — a certain stillness before you get ready to do things. So when you get ready to hit you're there. You're all there.

Health and strength are necessary. Resources are also necessary. If you have resources without health and strength, resources are useless. They all work together. If I'm asking for anything, I'm asking for light, love, and power. That's what I want. To try and stay as fast and as quick to pick-up on the musical language as soon as it's said. To try to be an improviser that's on top of his game. That's difficult without having to resort to the same old licks, the same old things, the same old tunes, without having to do that. That's my challenge. STN *William Hooker's Hard Time is now available on Squealer Music. Thomas Stanley is the co-author of For The Record: George Clinton & P-Funk: An Oral History (avonbooks.com)*