



Dave Douglas and Elan Mehler - If There Are Mountains

Musicians:

Dave Douglas - Trumpet/compositions

Elan Mehler - Piano/compositions

Dominique Eade - Vocals

John Gunther - Tenor Sax, Clarinet and Bass Clarinet

Simón Willson - Bass

Dayeon Seok - Drums

I've been pitching Dave Douglas to come record for Newvelle Records since the label began, so it genuinely surprised me when Dave proposed recording a project together. Dave had set some haikus to music in the early 2000's, and we had covered one of those songs — "Village of No Bells" — on a gig we played together in Denver. I loved the way Dave told an almost parallel story to these short lines from 17th century poet Basho, amplifying the message but also turning it on its head.

Village of No Bells

Basho

(Composition: Dave Douglas)

Village of no bells

Spring evenings

What's to listen for?

Despite my lack of knowledge of Japanese poetry, I started reading haikus and searching for a "click" that would inspire some compositional ideas for me. It was rough going. I had expected this world of ancient Japanese poems to yield images and gestures that would be fertile ground for musical exploration. Haikus, to my uneducated ears, were often quotidian and startlingly matter of fact. But, inspired by Dave's faith in me, I spent weeks reading through collections, feeling completely lost. Then, I found my spark:

Even a Nameless Stream

Yosa Buson
(Composition: Elan Mehler)

May rains
Even a nameless stream
Is a frightening thing

I heard those first two words, “May rains,” in an ascending interval of a fifth. A declaration and a harbinger and the rest of the song followed in minutes. I loved building these compositions out of such coded input. It felt like a key to a secret world. When I heard what Dave had been composing in our first rehearsal, it sent me reeling (and back to the drawing board on my own tunes). Dave is well-known in certain circles for his fastidious charts, but not in the way you would expect. There’s a movement in improvised music toward the overly elaborate composition. Mixed meter, thorough composition, elaborate counterpoint, and huge stylistic changes are all commonplace. In contrast, Dave’s compositions are generally very simple but also very precise. This rigor of attention is actually freeing for the musician, because the departure point is so clear. Something in Dave’s style has a clear consonance with the haiku form: “Start here. Jump.”

We Saw You Off

Text by Saigyō
(Composition: Dave Douglas)

We saw you off
And returning through the fields
I thought, Morning dew had wet my sleeves
But it was tears

With Your Singing

Text by Bashō
(Composition: Dave Douglas)

With your singing make me lonelier than ever
You solitary bird
Cuckoo of the forest

What an incredible band we’ve pulled together for this record! John, Dominique, Simón and Dayeon have such unique perspectives and voices, and it was humbling to see how they threw themselves into these compositions. This band coalesced around the initial gig in Denver in 2018. Dave and Dominique had known each other for many years. I had just met Dominique at a Lee Konitz show, and we subsequently played a duo show. Dominique is a bit of a legend around Boston. She’s been a mentor and a teacher to many if not most

of the outstanding vocalists of the last couple of decades, and her years of work with Ran Blake are a continual astonishment.

If There Are Mountains

Santoka Taneda
(Composition: Dave Douglas)

If there are mountains
I look at the mountains
On rainy days
I listen to the rain

Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter
Tomorrow, too, will be good
Tonight, too, is good

The Spring Current

Text by Buson
(Composition: Elan Mehler)

Wading through it
Her feet muddied
The spring current

Working on these pieces made me think of one of my favorite poets and song writers, Adam-McBride Smith. Adam has a real gift for evocative natural depictions. I had set to music a poem of his, "Here on the Plains," for a project we released together in 2010. I knew it would be perfect for this band. Oncel started tinkering with it, I reached out to Adam about working on something new, and he wrote the astonishing lyrics to "Wolf Orchard."

Wolf Orchard

Text by Adam McBride-Smith
(Composition: Elan Mehler)

In orchard dreams
The hired man's gone
And hounds lie low

How the gold grass climbs
In orchard dreams

In orchard dreams

How the cold frost limes
The wire bound cross
And foxglove crowns
The fruitless beams

Now the cold keeps time
Disordered scenes
And bootless dreams

Man's gone now
And wolves lie down
In Orchard dreams

Here on the Plains

Text by Adam McBride-Smith
(Composition: Elan Mehler)

Through the window
We watch the wind blow
Silver breakers through the summer fields
Storm-clouds' shadows
Swallow silos
Homes and hedgerows
Man the harpoons!

Here on the plains we wake
To find the air grown salty
Our talk saltier still
Interlaced with courtly pleasantries,
And perilous diphthongs from old world tongues
Our hands would almost
Mistake the plow handle for keel

And we go sailing off
Into the endless waves of grass

The overwhelming emotion I get out of listening again to the record, almost a year after we got out of the studio, is gratitude. I'm writing these notes in June 2020, and the world feels VERY unbalanced and frightening. It's such a balm to feel thankful. To feel connected—with these poets, these amazing musicians, the music, the Newvelle Community, Marc Urselli and our home at East Side Sound, the visual artists who lend us their work every year... It all spins out into something larger and it alights on an evening like this, like an enormous gift.

- Elan Mehler