ELECTRIC BASSES, TRUMPETS AND OTHER CALIFORNIAN STORIES

by Alberto Popolla

Flea - *Honora*
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Who knows whether this debut album will mark the beginning of a parallel career, rather like the thoroughly enjoyable one pursued by Charlie Watts, who, while drumming for the Rolling Stones, always remained faithful to his first love, jazz, keeping his quintet and various other projects going. The comparison with Watts has more to do with the surprise of seeing a rocker turn toward jazz than with the music itself. *Honora*, the title of the album by Red Hot Chili Peppers bassist Flea, is certainly immersed in jazz atmospheres, but of a very particular kind, thanks to the presence of a number of musicians whose profiles are themselves unusual - at least from this vantage point - revealing a degree of discernment behind the project that is, in some respects, unexpected.

To understand *Honora* properly, it is necessary to begin with Flea's collaborators and try to grasp the cultural and musical soil from which the record grows. First of all there is the trio of Jeff Parker on guitar, Josh Johnson on saxophone (and, in this case, production), and Anna Butterss on double bass, all members of the ETA IVtet together with drummer Jay Bellerose, who does not appear on the album. Much of *Honora*'s distinctiveness and fascination begins precisely with the presence of these musicians: artists far removed from the star system, devoted to research and to forms of music that might be described as experimental and unusual, yet of considerable substance. It is certainly surprising to find them alongside a musician of undoubted quality who has nevertheless long inhabited the world of fairly commercial rock - though never a trivial one, and often capable of highly interesting ideas over the course of a long career - such as that of the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

The best known of the three is undoubtedly Jeff Parker, formerly a member of the post-rock groups Tortoise and Isotope 217, among the most innovative and formative projects of the 1990s, and of the Chicago Underground Trio with trumpeter Rob Mazurek and drummer Chad Taylor, creators of an explosive and exhilarating avant-garde jazz mixture. Parker has also taken part in an extraordinary number of collaborations and projects, ranging from Joshua Abrams to Meshell Ndegeocello, Jason Moran, Hamid Drake, Makaya McCraven and Matana Roberts, and is a member of Chicago's historic AACM. In short, he is one of the most interesting and innovative voices in jazz and experimental music in recent years.

Based in Chicago, in 2013 Parker moved to Los Angeles with his wife, convinced that he was leaving behind a scene rich in creativity and open to countless influences, from dub to rock, rap, techno and, of course, jazz. Instead, somewhat unexpectedly, he began to become the focal point of a community with similar characteristics, helped in part by the relative absence of an established alternative circuit (see Haver Currin, 2026). His nights at the ETA bar - a venue named in homage to the tennis academy in David Foster Wallace's masterpiece *Infinite Jest* - together with drummer Jay Bellerose, a highly sought-after session player eager for new experiences, drew in a small but determined group of musicians who approached free improvisation in a distinctive and original way: shaping long suites through minimal means while constantly altering the sonic fabric, with particular attention to sound and interplay.

Vivid examples of this approach are the ETA IVtet and SML. The latter includes the aforementioned Anna Butterss and Josh Johnson, both regulars at the ETA bar nights, together with guitarist Greg

Uhlmann, drummer Booker Stardrum and electronic musician Jeremiah Chiu. Their recordings have all appeared on Chicago's International Anthem, a label that has clearly recognized the vitality of this small scene. Echoes and methods of this approach can also be heard in Flea's solo album: he has understood both its freshness and its vitality, absorbed it, and fully integrated it into his own compositions.

Take, for example, the almost eleven minutes of *Frailed*: a kind of psychedelic dub traversed by a delicate trumpet riff, an agile bass line that gets under the skin, Nathaniel Walcott's enveloping Fender Rhodes, improvisational touches of flute and viola from Warren Ellis, Deantoni Parks's spare drumming with a snare treated by John Frusciante - the longtime Red Hot Chili Peppers guitarist, who also plays trumpet on the track - and a subdued yet rhythmically incisive guitar connected to Flea's delay-soaked trumpet in a seductive, almost intimate dialogue. These are eleven minutes of genuine breathing space, a kind of fulcrum for the entire record and an exact statement of its stylistic character.

That creative freedom also embraces the poised funk of *Traffic Lights*, with inevitable echoes of Radiohead given Thom Yorke's presence on vocals; the Gil Scott-Heron-like atmosphere of *A Plea*, with horn riffs recalling British jazz-rock and an intriguing weave between Flea's electric bass and Anna Butterss's double bass; and the delicate, dreamy and melancholy reworking of the Funkadelic classic *Maggot Brain*, another jewel of the album.

The ability to explore different territories and connect them within a single coherent vision also produces a splendid version of *Wichita Lineman*, by the award-winning American songwriter, producer and singer Jimmy Webb. The song became a huge hit in Glen Campbell's 1968 recording and is recast here as an intense, aching ballad through Nick Cave's remarkable interpretation. There is also *Thinkin Bout You* by Frank Ocean and Shea Taylor, wrapped in strings and illuminated by alternating melodic lines from bass and trumpet, with Flea sounding poetic and dreamlike; and the energetic, psychedelic *Free As I Want To Be*, a repeated funk groove rippled by Parker's guitar and rich in dub echoes, a fitting closing track whose title seems to state the album's intent.

Mention should also be made of the molten *Golden Wingship*, an experimental opening miniature characterized by the tangle of electric bass and double bass; the Coleman-esque - in the Ornette sense - *Morning Cry*, with free dialogue between Parker and Flea's trumpet and the rhythm section of Butterss and Deantoni Parks brought beautifully to the fore; and the nocturnal *Willow Weep For Me*, the jazz standard composed by Ann Ronell and dedicated by her to George Gershwin, with Josh Johnson's Moog insinuating itself into the sonic fabric and lifting Flea's enchanting trumpet melody.

A Coherent Pastiche of the Highest Order

Funkadelic; a celebrated producer, singer and songwriter such as Jimmy Webb; a jazz standard by Ann Ronell; Frank Ocean; Radiohead's Thom Yorke; Nick Cave; Rickey Washington, Kamasi's father, on flute; experimentalists and jazz musicians such as Jeff Parker, Anna Butterss and Deantoni Parks; John Frusciante and Chad Smith of the Red Hot Chili Peppers; Josh Johnson's saxophone and production; spoken word, dub, jazz, rock and funk; Flea's trumpet, bass, compositions and reinterpretations; and the enchanting cover featuring a photograph of Shahin Badiyan, the Iranian mother of Flea's wife Melody Ehsani: all this and much more flows into a rich and fertile sonic vision that makes *Honora* a small jewel of creative freedom.

Perhaps this is the product of the Los Angeles scene itself, capable of holding together forms of music that only appear distant from one another, but are united in a fascinating experimental crucible. Jeff Parker's migration from Chicago - historically a forge of different styles and approaches - to Los

Angeles seems to have produced a kind of synthesis that naturally and spontaneously brings everything together within a somewhat more restrained framework. There is a clear minimalist influence here, working through lightness and the construction of sound rather than repetition, encouraging interweaving and hybridization, the development of sonic texture, and improvisation.

Unexpectedly, considering that it was conceived by a rock musician such as Flea, *Honora* gathers these different impulses and organizes them brilliantly, giving them both form and substance. Listening to Jeff Parker's ETA IVtet, to SML, or even to Butterss's relatively little-known solo album *Mighty Vertebrate*, one can trace the inspiration and versatility that feed *Honora*: the search for and creation of a different improvisational orientation, far removed from the cries and abrasiveness typical of historical free jazz, and attentive instead to the construction of a musical narrative with minimalist traits yet populated by many characters who play a story together and offer it to us gently, with a slight detachment, like genuine storytellers.

Flea manages to express his longstanding love of jazz without ever flaunting his exceptional skill on electric bass, placing it entirely at the service of the music. At the same time he approaches the trumpet - his first love, though certainly not his main instrument - with passion and creativity. Over the last two years he has cultivated and studied it consistently under the guidance of Kamasi Washington's father, Rickey, achieving an apt lyricism and considerable taste. It is a performance of genuine value, and an album that will not easily be forgotten.

Listening

Jeff Parker ETA IVtet, *The Way Out Of Easy*, International Anthem, 2024.

Jeff Parker ETA IVtet, *Happy Today*, International Anthem, 2026.

SML, *Small Medium Large*, International Anthem, 2024.

SML, *How You Been*, International Anthem, 2025.

Anna Butterss, *Mighty Vertebrate*, International Anthem, 2024.

Reading

Grayson Haver Currin, *How Jeff Parker Changed the Sound of Jazz*, Pitchfork, 30 April 2026.

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