

It's a dry, windy afternoon in West Texas. We're surrounded by a vast expanse of the Chihuahuan Desert, an endless panorama of treeless, brown slopes consisting only of dirt, rock and yucca. Its beauty is awe-inspiring in its emptiness and scale. We meet at a barbed wire fence along an otherwise empty road. The fence and the road are the only indications of human presence around here. And the road seems to solely deliver those who are about to share in this experience, a musical performance at a most untypical venue. Most of us are far from home. Some live in the nearest major city, 130 kilometers to the west. The largest US municipality along its Southern border, El Paso is only half the size of its inextricable Mexican next-door neighbor Ciudad Juárez, a city infamous for its murder rates and maquiladoras. With five bridges, the two cities share more border crossings than any other in the world.

On that drive from El Paso, there is one brief moment when the unlikely structures can be seen as odd blips far off in the desert. Only someone in-the-know would spot them. Having arrived at the meeting point, just a few kilometers away from our destination, we still somehow have no view of this extraordinary monument. Is it hidden in plain sight? Most gathered had never before seen The Hill of James Magee. At this time, very few had ever seen images of this legendary yet obscure testament to *Absolute Dedication*. In the 30 years since the beginning of its construction, the very few permitted a visit were prohibited from taking photos.

At the barbed wire fence, guests are offered two options for the final phase of their journey: load into one of several four-wheel-drive vehicles which will shuttle us up the few kilometers of a winding dirt road, or walk among the cactus and brush along this same path. Either way, the final link of the journey is dramatic as the site comes into view, its four structures appearing as an aberration in this humanless expanse. With no other trace of civilization, far from the grid of electrical power, at the end of this rugged dirt road, they seem inexplicable. They are as unlikely as the monolith of 2001, *A Space Odyssey*. They appear out of nowhere, as if ruins from some forgotten civilization. But they are not weathered or deteriorated, as ancient remnants. They are clearly being cared for. In fact, they constitute a work-in-progress.

Four flat-roofed buildings, positioned at exact cardinal points, stand over 5 meters high on four 3-meter high platforms. The buildings, platforms and connecting cruciform walkway are constructed of the same irregularly cut shale rock. Each has two sets of towering iron doors extending the height of the structure. One set of doors on each building faces its opposite, 57-meters across the other end of the walkway. (The opening of these portals, with the immense screeches of their massive hinges, is a dramatic performance in and of itself.) Identical on the outside, each building contains distinct sculptural works within, constructions of industrial intensity holding organic fragility. Our concert involves the opening of the North and South Buildings, each containing imposing steel frames unfolding on massive hinges in several layers to uncover glass enclosures. Within these mighty enclosures, strata of shattered glass, rust, spice, textiles, flower petals, and other textured and organic materials collage into topographies of pain and ecstasy. (The Hill is a work in

progress, and the West Building has about a dozen more years before construction will be completed.)

Everything about Magee's Hill confounds in the intensity of its dedication. How did one man with no training as an architect or engineer construct these buildings, out in the middle of nowhere, off the grid, with a single assistant? How did he get these massive and fragile works of steel and glass up here? There is a religious implication to The Hill. Its architecture is ceremonial in form. A visit requires pilgrimage into the desert. The site is not actually on a hill, and one wonders what is implied in titling it "The Hill". Religious connotations consummate with explicit traces of Magee's life in New York City in the 1970s. The titles of the sculptures (long poems committed to memory by Magee) were first recited at that time among the gay men cruising Manhattan's Christopher Street Piers. They were performed in the resonance of giant stainless steel milk containers strewn about the Staten Island junkyard where Magee lived. The flesh, blood, ecstasy, pain, love, tragedy, longing, fellowship, solitude and the steel, glass, stone, cables, and chains are among the substance of the words, materials and forms which comprise The Hill.

Magee reserves a particular zeal for The Hill as a site for the performance of experimental music. He emphasizes a permanent commitment to these events, and has very strong feelings regarding the artistic quality of the music. To say that The Hill is no ordinary venue would be an understatement. The emotional weight of the work itself may only be surpassed by the unfathomable dedication evident in the mere existence of the place. The Hill regularly brings visitors to tears. As a site of performance, it asks for a lot of a musician and offers a lot in return.

This recording documents the first of an ongoing series of collaborative presentations at The Hill by The Cornudas Mountain Foundation and Nameless Sound. John Butcher and Joe McPhee each testify to their own unwavering commitment every time breath meets horn. At The Hill, they sound space acoustically and psychically, engineering wind against architecture, memory and emotion in poetic dialog with Magee's own unfathomable devotion. This CD presents their complete performance on that afternoon out in the desert. (Far from an electrical grid, it was recorded using two microphones into battery-powered equipment.) One could call these duets and solos, but The Hill and this landscape indeed have voices as well. One could call it improvisation, but architecture does offer the authority of a score. The first piece begins with the two saxophonists playing simultaneously, in two separate buildings. In the left speaker, we hear McPhee in the North Building. In the right, we hear Butcher at the other end of that 57-meter long walkway in the South Building. At one point, the saxophonists exit the buildings, continue playing as they walk to the opposite structure, passing each other at the center of the cruciform walkway. The recording's mapping of this movement across two sides of the complex offers a much different experience than was had by audience members who were divided between the two buildings on that day. Your left speaker represents the microphone feed from inside the North Building. Your right documents the feed from the South Building. Tracks 2 through 6

document the concert's second half. During the intermission, engineer Ryan Edwards placed the microphones outside of the buildings. The audience was seated on the ground, below the cruciform walkway and platforms. We get alternating solos from McPhee and Butcher, and conclude with a duet. Again, the site is audibly present: the wind, the slap-back reflection between the opposing iron doors, and a mapping of the walkway as a saxophone player walks its straight line.

This music needs no context to be enjoyed. But I hope that some sense of the environment and this unparalleled site has been conveyed in these notes. For those interested in a more thorough reading of The Hill and James Magee, I would recommend *James Magee: The Hill* by Richard Betrell and Jed Morse, with exquisite photographs by Tom Jenkins (the only published photos ever taken of The Hill). When offered the opportunity to curate a concert of music at this rare site, John Butcher and Joe McPhee came immediately to mind, and it's a great pleasure to listen to them again now on this recording. It brings me back to that afternoon when 70 or so people journeyed from around the continent and parked their cars on an empty road in the middle of a great desert. And it was all to experience the coming together of these three extraordinary artists, who on that afternoon offered an hour or so of vision, wisdom, emotion, and virtuosity forged from three lives of *Absolute Dedication*.

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