

# A Skeleton Key to *Five Drawings* by Joseph E Yoakum

Luke Gullickson

I want to feel the windows thrown open.

I want all the doors to be open.

I want the fresh air blowing in.

-- UNKNOWN

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## 1. Introduction

Sometime in early 2010 I encountered the landscape drawings of Joseph Yoakum at the Art Chicago festival. A celebrated figure in the circle of “outsider art,” Yoakum’s life story is shrouded by a scrim of uncertainty that is perhaps, for my purposes here, best left in place. Official records indicate that he was born in 1888 in Missouri; he claimed to have been born in Arizona on the Navajo Nation. His father was evidently of Cherokee descent; nonetheless Yoakum was proud of his claimed Navajo heritage (he evidently pronounced the word “Na-va-Joe,” with a hard J). Various accounts record that he left home at an age as young as nine to join the circus, traveling with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show and other groups, and also visited Europe as a stowaway. All of these stories may be apocryphal. He apparently returned to Missouri in 1908, at age twenty, and in mid-life ended up in Chicago. He was briefly committed to a psychiatric hospital. And by the early 1950s--a man in his sixties--he was consistently producing drawings.

The drawings are striking in their unique and compelling vision of places and landscapes. Something ties them all together, an inescapable sense that wherever Yoakum traveled, physically or mentally, he was seeing those places through a unique and powerful set of eyes. His initial subjects were the places around the country he very well might have seen in youthful travels (circus-related or otherwise). By his later years he’d turned his artistic attention to further-flung locations such as Australia and the Andes Mountains--places it is doubtful though

not impossible that he had actually physically visited. In all cases, a forceful impression of these places' resonances remains in the drawings.

I first had the idea of writing music based on Yoakum's drawings in the spring of 2011. At first I planned a series of short orchestral pieces, then music for mixed chamber ensemble. On a canoe in Wisconsin in September of that year I began to conceive of the piece as an album, and planned an instrumentation based around friends I had in Chicago -- a violinist, a violist, a clarinetist, a percussionist, and a few vocalists I planned to work with.

Few of these people ended up playing on the final product. I began sketching the five movements when I moved to Chicago in September 2011, and it was mostly done when I left for New Mexico in June 2012. Over the course of these months the project morphed from an innocuous chamber-music project to a complex and ambiguous musical construction that traces a sinuous autobiographical pathway and maps a great deal of musical and spiritual topography.

In my typical manner, I was on to other personal and artistic adventures immediately upon finishing *Five Drawings by Joseph E Yoakum*, and never properly promoted the recording. Its formal construction is idiosyncratic and its aesthetic priorities insistent but unusually ordered. As such it might be the most inaccessible music I've ever made, yet to me personally it is vulnerably, almost painfully intimate.

This isn't a combination that makes for simple and easy promulgation of a product.

Revisiting it now, a year after its completion, I recognize that *Five Drawings by Joseph E Yoakum* contains musical depth and fascinating ambiguities, and deserves more than the paltry public showing I've given it.

I approach the present document with at least a small pretension of musicological objectivity, and in the manner of a literary exegete, I offer it as an annotation to enrich listening. I hope it might allow this music's occasionally subterranean virtues to breathe a bit of open air.

## 2. Schematics

Table ONE

<b>Movement</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Element</b>	<b>Parameter</b>	<b>Season</b>	<b>Life-Phase / State</b>
Valley of the Moon	Wyoming	fire	harmony	spring	birth / curiosity
Mt Huron Range	Michigan	water	melody	summer	youth / ambition
The Fertel Mounds	Kansas	earth	rhythm	fall	consciousness
Mt Safama	Bolivia	air	texture	winter	the unconscious
Mt Negoi	Romania	lightning	form	spring	the superconscious / imagination

Table TWO

<b>Movement</b>	<b>Guitar</b>	<b>Piano</b>	<b>Clarinet</b>	<b>Violin</b>	<b>Viola</b>	<b>Mandolin</b>	<b>Harmonium</b>	<b>Autoharp</b>	<b>Author</b>
Valley of the Moon	–	x	x	x	x	–	x	–	x
Mt Huron Range	x	x	–	x	x	x	x	–	x
The Fertel Mounds	–	x	x	–	x	–	x	–	x
Mt Safama	x	–	–	x	–	x	–	x	x
Mt Negoi	x	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	x

Table THREE

<b>Movement</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Narrative Elements</b>
Valley of the Moon	6:01	campfire conversation and solemn pauses; hidden guitar
Mt Huron Range	4:51	restaurant humming and Lake Michigan sounds
The Fertel Mounds	5:34	hidden guitar
Mt Safama	3:05	winter radiator whistling and springtime open windows
Mt Negoi	10:14	yurt morning; bacon frying; cult story and dream account; silent prayer

### 3. Form and Cycles

In December of 2010 I returned to the states after spending ten weeks as a musician-in-residence at the Banff Centre for the Arts in the Rocky Mountains of Alberta, Canada. I'd gone there under the auspices of a jazz fellowship, as though my formal education was in classical composition, I'd begun to fancy myself moving forward as more of a "jazz" musician, the scare-quotes here indicating the increasingly common sentiment among creative musicians schooled in the tradition that there's a weird and ironic sense of historical dissonance in the practice of playing popular tunes from the 1940s in a manner identical to that of the great players of the 1950s. Which is to say, I wanted to write my own music, but I wanted to play it myself and improvise around it with other players capable of reading and improvising on a high level. I've since found that such people are scarce indeed outside New York City. Regardless.

As the winter solstice approached I found solace and inspiration in a new album by the influential, mercurial composer and saxophonist Steve Coleman. A musician sprung from the jazz tradition but deeply personal in his approach, Coleman is more well-known in Europe, where most of his recent recordings have been issued. The 2010 record, *Harvesting Semblances and Affinities*, was released in the US by Pi Recordings, a Brooklyn label which has held my attention ever since. The album is built around certain natural cycles and honors the idea of capturing life-moments in musical form. Some of the compositions' titles contain references to the solstices and equinoxes, to certain days of the year, and to cycles of opening and closing. There is a hermetic focus to the musical logic therein, and the playing of the band and the rhythmic structures of the compositions--not to mention the explicitly stated thematic underpinnings of the music--reflect structural conceits that are basically cyclical in nature.

It's hard to justify this statement with any sort of empirical musicological data. I'll mention the asymmetrical rhythmic cycle that underlies the first track, and the constant returns of material in a sort of developing variation form that controls the orchestration of Coleman's Per Nørgård arrangement *Flos ut rosa floruit*. The presence of cyclical forms is an emergent sensation, however, and a subversive, transgressive way to make music in a society based on growth and development; stories have climaxes; businesses and careers grow; to come around again to where we started is an idea everywhere in our mythologies but buried beneath the monolithic forces of modernity.

I've begun to wonder if even an analog watch is a transgressive thing to carry on your wrist. Digital time is the order of the day. Time is money, and can accordingly be bought, sold, spent, and wasted. In an analog worldview these things make no sense; time is a circle, time is a cycle that is always returning; time is the shifting of light.

We see then in cyclical music a representation of nature and of the body, which too has its cycles that can be honored or, as more often attempted in modern society, ignored as best as we can, and hidden from our attentions as completely as possible.

The cycles I considered in the Yoakum music were cycles of consciousness. Some of the life-states reflected in the music are listed above in Table One. Each day is a consciousness cycle that contains awakening, curiosity, energetic motion outward, imagination and creation reflective motion inward, and finally a return to unconsciousness. Living our lives in tune with and in honor of these cycles, we can bring the whole daily drama into perspective and become attuned to the broader resonances that drive our lives; we can join the super-consciousness above.

In my own travels and travails over the last decade I've found similar cycles recurring in my relationship to new places. I've attempted to set these feelings to music before, notably in my pieces *Terlingua Meditations* and *On the Beach at Kantishna*, the latter of which is built on the idea of arriving at a new place, exulting in its strangeness, and feeling the extant energies swimming under what is seen, what is tangibly sensed. In *Five Drawings by Joseph E Yoakum* I wanted to conceptually unpack "travel" in a broader way, to begin with simple and exciting experiences of new places, moving outward with increasing obscurity and apocrypha as we began to address places Yoakum likely never saw. He was painting landscapes from within, refracting his personal experiences of place onto the unexpected physical canvas of real places that he'd never known.

The experience of a trip can mirror the cycle of a human life. In *Five Drawings by Joseph E Yoakum*, the tallest mountains appear in the outer two movements. The Big Horns of Wyoming and the mysterious Mt Negoi are the hurdles of birth and death that bound the experience. The second movement, Mt Huron Range, reflects the foothillsy territory that might represent our adolescence, our initial triumphs and challenges. Then, like wide America with its two big oceans, the album too has central plains that represent the slower, subtler rates of change we find in our middle years. The mounds of Kansas offer the album's zenith of corporeal experience. When we reach Mt Safama our physical presences begin to ebb into memory, or more properly for Yoakum into invention, into the silky mental firmament of thought and imagination.

As implied above in Table One, I assigned each movement a physical element (ending in the fifth movement, fancifully, with lightning) and a musical parameter. The practice of focusing one's efforts on one musical parameter only for a given piece or movement is admittedly trite and nonsensical. Hopefully they are all always present in any music; in fact, I'm not sure it's possible even if one tried to prevent a listener from listening to any given piece with an ear toward melody, or toward rhythmic listening or formal perception. The practice here, along with the more mystical association of each movement with a physical element, simply served as a compositional prompt. In the following sections I'll describe some of the ways that I foregrounded the given physical elements and musical parameters in each movement, and also explore how the chosen narrative elements pair with the composed music to create a complex and mysterious composite that also reflects the overriding cycles and schematics described above.

#### **4. First movement -- "Valley of the Moon in Big Horn Mtn Rang Sheridan Wyoming"**

The native element of this movement is fire. It begins with a match strike, representing the sudden, jarring spark of inspiration, the instant of birth, the journey of a thousand miles

beginning with the proverbial single step. The music is composed around the narrative thread of a group of friends talking around a campfire.

In September of 2011, shortly after moving with what was for me quite unusual decisiveness to Chicago, I rode the El downtown and spent a long morning composing at a grand piano in a place called Curtiss Hall, on the tenth floor of the Fine Arts Building. My friends and I have held a number of concerts there over the years; in my travels, Curtiss Hall was a place I often landed to hear my music played and rendezvous with friends before setting off for the next adventure.

I wrote a series of chords that day. You hear the strings and piano articulating them throughout the movement. They came to represent certain elements in Yoakum's drawings; I named them fanciful things like "tree chord," "fire chord," and "mystery chord." I won't bother any listener by telling them which is which; it suffices to say that all of three aforementioned chords, and a few more, recur throughout the album. They're transferred to the second movement in the same key, and they're also foundational in the third and fourth movements. The final movement departs significantly in musical content and maintains only the fundamental key of Bb, held static in the first movement by the open third in the harmonium.

The native musical parameter of the first movement is harmony; form and forward motion is punctuated by the progression between the major signal chords articulated by the strings and piano. The lines in the violin and viola are drawn into truly melodic content in the next movement.

The friends telling stories around the fire are real people telling real stories. I recorded them in the summer of 2010 in Grand Lake, Colorado; I was staying that summer in a little compound of tiny old cabins with a bunch of actors and musicians and theater technicians, and one night I invited several out to the fire and turned on a recording device. Most of them didn't know it was there. One of them told stories of his theater education, his often ill-fated romantic exploits, and an injury sustained by his father. The others reacted. I am present on the recording as well, laughing and occasionally commenting.

I like to imagine us hidden away in the forest depicted by Yoakum in his drawing of the Big Horns. That summer was my last with the theater in Colorado. The autumn that followed was a time of significant reckoning. I look back on that evening and that free-ranging conversation, with its jovial tone that almost managed to distract us from the numinous whispers of the forest and the mountains around us, and the big old lake back behind the cabins that stood 600 or so feet deep in the center, and clearly knew much more than we usually liked to think about. I look back on that conversation as a furtive moment of peace tightly coiled around this fire in the middle of the wilderness, deep in the middle of the valley.

When I planned the album and wrote the music, I had never been to the Big Horn Mountains. A couple years later I spent an achingly romantic couple of weeks gazing at them from across the valley to the east when I was an artist-in-residence at the Ucross Foundation near Sheridan, Wyoming, and I drove across them in September 2013 under similarly charged circumstances.

## **5. Second movement -- "Mt Huron Range Near Marquette Michigan"**

This movement was the first that I finished in recorded form, in November 2011, in the thrall of my first season in Chicago. I felt at home, at first. I moved to Rogers Park, on the far north side of the city, into an apartment a block and a half from Lake Michigan. I still hear in this movement the initial excitement I felt in the move. My energy was still a summer energy, flush with possibility and promise. The seeds hadn't come up, yet.

The native element of this movement is water, represented musically by the omnipresent string tremolos and narratively / concretely by the recorded sounds of Lake Michigan lapping against the shore. I recorded these sounds a few days before Thanksgiving, 2011.

The programmatic chords from the first movement return, but here the threads of melody are stretched out to create lines with a broader reach. It's the most naturally melodic of the movements, though the lines in the piano "solos" carry through to "The Fertel Mounds."

It's a dramatic experience to drive, as I often have, from Iowa east across the Mississippi River and the plains of northern Illinois to reach the gradually thickening suburbs of Chicago, where the density of people and height of buildings increases exponentially until suddenly you hit the lake shore and all is water. I associate Chicago quite powerfully with water for this reason. The city hugs the lake, and even now sitting in my busy neighborhood, the lake is there, its gray immensity always present, holding within it so much of the unknown and unknowable.

## **6. Third movement -- "The Fertel Mounds of Grand Preary Near Hutchinson Kansas"**

The native element of this movement is earth, represented by its easily undulating rhythms, static harmony, and rolling lines that suggest the subtle rising and falling of the country's central plains. A few of the chords from "Valley of the Moon" still recur, and the piano's solo material is drawn from the lines in "Mt Huron Range." The dry one-note syncopations from that watery movement are back here in the viola, even drier, single notes punctuating the piano lines that move outward like a gaze proceeding from one's feet to the distant horizon.

One day in May 2009 I was driving across western Kansas, near Hutchinson and Garden City, and stopped late, long after dark, at a "state fishing lake" indicated by my atlas to offer campsites. I didn't find them, but found space enough to throw down for the evening. The lake, as far as I could tell in my brief explorations that evening and the next morning, was dry. I climbed a small rise and looked out to the unimpeded view in every direction. There were storms in nearly every sector of the sky, lightning striking in the distance everywhere, but it never encroached, and I stayed dry the whole night.

## **7. Fourth movement -- "Mt Safama Near Oruna Bolivia South America"**

The native element of this movement is air, represented musically by textural space and narratively by the mode of recording. I recorded the guitar and piano with my windows wide open, catching the sounds of the passing cars and the space of the room around me. It's a piece

about waiting. That one chord from the previous movements, the one-note syncopations; the musical material is familiar. It's the space that's new, the sound of me counting beats that I decided to leave in the mix, the extra unintentional sounds of the night. This is all meant to convey a texture of ambiguity. I'm not sure if Yoakum went to Bolivia; probably not. For my part, I was in Chicago working a teaching contract and not playing enough gigs, and I felt the pull of travel and the lure of the unknown and the unknowable, a summer in New Mexico stretching out before me but still veiled in the future by the great not knowing. I felt that pull as I sat in that Chicago apartment trapped in the springtime. I went on long runs, that spring, further and further, but as far as I went there was still just more city, stretching out in every direction.

The colors of this drawing are hollow, the shapes empty to be filled by the imagination. It is a tenuous creative construction, without flesh, only the vagrant fantasy of a mountain like the distantly seen outlines on the horizon that might only be clouds.

## **8. Fifth movement -- "Mt Negoï Near Faragas Romania Eur Asia"**

In January of 2012, before the events of the aforementioned spring, I traveled to New Mexico and met friends in Albuquerque. We drove north following the Chama River and crossed into Colorado below Cumbres Pass. In a building snowstorm we stopped the car, ate some sandwiches, and skied into the woods. We had rented a yurt. We skied up the hill to the yurt and got there and made a fire and started to cook some food. It was cold in there and then it was excruciatingly hot and then we figured out how to manage the fire. We drank melted snow. Then we opened wine and drank that too. The first night we barely slept at all, because we'd driven and skied ourselves to 11,000 feet and then had a bunch of wine to drink, and because the fire kept going out and had to be tended to.

In the morning we awoke to a fresh foot of snow. There was a commanding view below the yurt down to the Trujillo Meadows and up to the mountains behind them. We sat on the front porch of the yurt in the sun and drank coffee. We went out skiing and explored the area. We returned to the yurt, cooked more food, drank more wine. The second morning we sat around and read books and told stories while an expansive breakfast was prepared.

One of my friends at the yurt grew up in a highly restrictive religious community, and it is her story that we hear on the recording. I excerpted it, choosing some favorite moments. It is admittedly difficult to hear over the background noise of frying bacon.

In the fall of 2011 I had drafted a fifth, final movement to the Yoakum pieces. Sometime after the yurt trip, I threw the draft away completely. Not a note of it remains on the album. What I did instead for "Mt Negoï" is something I didn't do anywhere else on the album: I wrote music from the ground up, based completely on a pre-existing recording/narrative. The music is not notated. The movement is less compositional in its intents, more documentary, accompanimental.

The presence of this moment's native physical element, lightning, comes through the theme of inspiration and fear: the moment of creation, the instant of composition, the liminal moments of



birth and of death. Now we are in the mountains of Romania; Yoakum is sketching from his imagination and wider, transpersonal vision. It is the moment in his drawings, the death of reality in the birth of artifice. The gray and purple colors carry vibrancy, and a threat.

The recurring chords and lines from the previous movements are now gone. The musical material has departed entirely from previous movements. Only the common key of Bb remains. The music is improvisatory in its flowing material and natural sense of exploration, but the form is carefully planned. Inspired by the episodic, sectional forms of the guitarist and composer John Fahey, I constructed several broadly symmetrical larger episodes cut with transitional material that also recurs. Everything recurs. Here is a map of the form:

ABABA	C	DEFefd	G	D'B'D'B'A	C	EFG
0:12	- 1:53	- 2:21	- 4:25	- 5:17	- 7:16	- 7:41

“Mt Negoi” is also a meditation on the ambiguities of storytelling. I have my own sense of trust in this narrator and her account. Her “cult” story is dramatic, full of fascinating, conflicted characters and complex, real relationships. But now it is a different story, because I’ve retold it through my excerpting, through the way the music accentuates certain moments and assigns emphasis to certain themes. What remains of the story’s documentary truth is an open question, like the authenticity of Yoakum’s visions.

Yet more mysterious is the dream account that closes the album (it begins at the return of the “C” material in the map above). A new narrator, one we haven’t heard from yet, describes a dream in great detail. The narrator is in a city, going running, gazing at a lake, a towering white temple, and boats in a small canal. The book to which he refers, and the identity of its author, remain open questions.

## 9. Coda

As the guitar music ends, you hear me take a deep breath. Then I sit, for a moment, offering a silent prayer. I chose to leave this charged silence as part of the composition. I don’t remember what I prayed for, if anything.