

Bananafish

Interviewed by Seymour Glass

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Jason Kahn: One thing I notice in the so-called electroacoustic scene, there's rarely anything being done with drummers. Maybe G_unter M_uller is an exception, but he's not really playing drums. He's a little more percussive than I am, playing with sticks, impact, but he leans, like I do, toward the implication of drums. The various improv scenes now seem to have something against drummers, as if playing with acoustic drums is passÉ. Strange attitude, I think.

Bananafish: My favorite instrument is signal processing.

Jason Kahn: More and more I wonder what the point of organizing sound into music is. Just walking down the street sounds so great. Everywhere you go, it's already there. I could listen to the refrigerator humming or the radio tuned between stations for a long time without getting bored. A concert PA before there's any signal coming through is such a great sound -- there's a little ground hum, maybe some hiss because it's so loud. Sometimes I think, "Why do they have to play music through that PA? It's already perfect."

Bananafish: Literature has gotten to that point for me. You remember that guy we passed on the way to lunch in the alley ranting to himself? He was still doing that monologue on our way back. He hadn't moved an inch in an hour-and-a-half. What is the point of going to see a show when there's this guy in the alley around the corner from your house doing marvelous Henri Chopin-esque sound poetry? I love reading about the Vienna Aktionists and Fluxus, but I feel the best performances are on the street. There's no cognizance of what's being done, for one thing. It's real and honest. When I was staying with Kevin Drumm, he kept telling me about Whitehouse. I've been hearing this name for a long time, and I finally got him to play some for me. Took one look at the CD and realized, "Oh, these guys are from art school." If it had that attitude without the theory behind it would be really cool. With that consciousness behind it, it's already within the realm of art or music. The art collection at the Museum of Art Bruit in Lausanne, Switzerland, is fantastic. The work there was done by people who had no concept of themselves as artists; they just sat down and drew sixteenth-of-an-inch daisies compulsively. By the time I left the museum, I felt that so much of what I saw there fully surpasses anything I could ever "consciously" do as a musician. It's the same with the refrigerator running, the defective ventilator or whatever it is. There are moments when I feel utterly inferior to the natural course of events. With words it's even more difficult. They can be just abstract sounds, but they have meaning behind them, that's hard to avoid. I don't really buy BrÉton's theory of automatic writing; maybe Burroughs was doing cut-ups for the same reason, to bypass logic. Either way absolves you of some of the intent, but you're always going to be there, and they become new techniques for your arsenal, ultimately. There was a pretty good cut-up in Bananafish 15. It sure seemed like a cut-up. It was funny.

Bananafish: You're talking about John Crouse? I assume that's just the way he writes.

Jason Kahn: It's not a cut-up?

Bananafish: I don't think so. I figure it's stream-of-consciousness if anything, but I haven't asked him.

Jason Kahn: Wow, how does he keep it up?

Bananafish: Maybe he's compulsive. This literary journal you had in Los Angeles...

Jason Kahn: That was in 1988; it was called Tongue. We had material by Benjamin Wiseman and Rita Valencia... Jesse Bernstein had story in there. It was really fun. I did all the editing and layout.

Bananafish: Was it photocopied?

Jason Kahn: No, it was printed -- a paperback. I worked at a printer at the time, doing layout. I printed and bound it there. I must have made about 500 copies. Had no distributor.

Bananafish: How'd you get rid of them?

Jason Kahn: Yeah, exactly. I'd go to readings and set them out, or take copies to Beyond Baroque, a literary center, put some on consignment in the bookstore. It was hopeless, actually. I couldn't continue doing it because I was doing it with another writer -- Gary Jacoboli -- and he didn't do much. I was playing in three bands, working a full-time job.

Bananafish: What motivated to you take on such a project in the first place?

Jason Kahn: I was writing myself, and was interested in the L.A. writers scene. Felt like contributing to it.

Bananafish: What were your selection criteria?

Jason Kahn: Well, basically if I liked it or not. It was all short prose pieces -- no excerpts from novels or anything like that. I would say it was all pretty linear. No cut-ups or anything free-associative. Classic short story format, although you wouldn't call what people like Benjamin Wiseman were doing "conventional." His work was less like storytelling and more like a painting or a snapshot. Jesse Bernstein's resembled the work of Burroughs, although more inside his own head. Basically autobiographical. Are you familiar with his work?

Bananafish: Same guy who Sub Pop released?

Jason Kahn: Yeah, that's the guy. I heard some of that record and didn't like it so much. Jesse was really into Burroughs, actually; who even wrote an introduction to one of his books, a blurb. Maybe that was my only problem with him, that he was too close to his favorite writer. Before that he was putting out little paperbacks on independent presses. I would find his books when I was playing in Seattle, but anywhere else they were hard to find. I met him in Los Angeles once, when he was giving a reading at the Lhasa Club on Melrose in 1988. He had a pretty tough life, going in and out of institutions both penal and mental. His arms were covered with self-made tattoos. He was lucid, but you could tell he'd been through hell. He was a very friendly guy, vibrant. I don't know why he committed suicide. He wasn't that old, something like forty-two. He might have been terminally ill, but I'm not sure. Anyway, I don't know how people write about music. Or anything at all, really. I would be at a loss for things to say. The critics I like are all old now, or dead -- Richard Meltzer, Lester Bangs -- and they didn't write about the music as much as their reactions to the music, their impressions of it, or their place in relation to it. They rarely said if it was good or bad as I recall. For me that kind of writing makes more sense, and for that reason, I'm invariably unable to describe my own music.

Bananafish: In general, it's a mistake to ask anyone to describe music, especially their own. One thing I've read repeatedly is that Repeat is named after This Heat's record of the same name. Is that true?

Jason Kahn: Uh, no. I have that record and I'm a big fan of This Heat, but the name of the band

occurred to me because of the nature of the music we were making. I don't mind if anyone thinks that we did name ourselves after that album, but we didn't.

Bananafish: Tell me about meeting Toshimaru Nakamura.

Jason Kahn: A friend of mine gave my name to the sax player Manu Kasugai, who was putting together a big band as musical accompaniment to a Butoh dance performance in Berlin in 1995. Toshi was still playing guitar at the time and was also invited to participate in the performance; we met then and talked about playing together, but we didn't do anything until a couple years later, in 1997. My kit had a lot of metal stuff and I might have been using the sampler then when he and I started to play together-- a little Yamaha SU10. Very limited. He was a very chops-oriented guitar-player at this time. He came to Europe with his group, A Paragon of Beauty, playing a music I would call post-No Wave, except that they had complicated arrangements and odd time signatures. He and I have never really talked about what we wanted to do. I would guess there's a general consensus between us that we'd like to get away from the expressive way of making music -- pushing yourself onstage, expressing yourself. Of course, it takes a certain amount of ego just to get onstage in the first place, but we're approaching it more subtly. I'm more interested in letting things breathe and run their natural course, rather than pushing sounds around. If something sounds good or flows well on its own, I don't want to try to control it. We don't discuss how we're going to start a concert or how we're going to end. The most we might decide upon is how many sets we're going to play. There's not so much to say.

Bananafish: One of the words that comes up over and over again in reviews of Repeat is REFINEMENT. It isn't terribly coarse music that you guys make, but I still wonder if there isn't a better word?

Jason Kahn: Maybe DISTILLATION, but that implies reduction as well. There's no conscious reduction in our music -- there's no conscious anything. Maybe only the mix is conscious. We record everything live-to-multitrack. The first CD we mixed some tracks together, but the second two Toshi mixed by himself and they reflect his taste in sound. In almost all cases, there is no editing or post-processing -- maybe some EQ and getting levels right.

Bananafish: If you're living in Zurich and Toshi lives in Tokyo, you must not see each other very often.

Jason Kahn: Less and less. Our first tour of Europe was in '97. He was staying in Berlin for about a month. He stayed at my place in '96 while I was in India, so he must have been there for two months. Usually we see each other for about a month in Europe, touring for two weeks and then hanging out in Berlin and recording for two weeks. I've made four or five three-to-five-week-visits to Japan. More gigs and recording. I stayed there in 1999 for three months. We played one gig during this time. In Tokyo there are maybe six or seven places to play and once you've played at a live house, how many more times can you play it? It wasn't interesting for me or Taku Sugimoto and the other people I was playing with to keep playing at these places. Otomo Yoshihide and Sachiko M hardly play in Tokyo at all, at least not when I was there. When they go to Europe, there are packed houses, good audiences. In Tokyo, it's hard to get a crowd, it's hard to get paid... Toshi was in Europe in the fall of 2000 and we did three concerts, and then in the spring 2001 we did one concert and recorded. Repeat is getting old and things have pretty much run their course. We still think the music we are playing is good, but the focus and energy are dissipating. Toshi's getting pretty famous working on his own and I'm busy with other projects. The first Repeat CD [Repeat, Cut/Reset, 1997] is a transitional recording for me, going from the structural way of playing that I did with Cut to letting more the sound take over; trying less to construct the music. Maybe for Toshi, too. That's when he started phasing out guitar. It was an interesting time; maybe it was in the air. A lot of people were getting into a new approaches -- Otomo was

phasing out Ground Zero at that time and starting up Filament, in which he plays no-record turntable and Sachiko plays no-input sampler. As far as I can tell this so-called onkyo scene is all about this approach.

Bananafish: Tell me about Bar Aoyama.

Jason Kahn: I was coming to Japan, Toshi was looking for places to play, and a friend of ours, guitarist Tetuzi Akiyama, knew of this very small, funky bar in Shibuya with low ceilings. Maybe an audience of twenty would fit inside. It was like a bunker or a tiny squat. Not very Japanese at all. I don't know if the bartender was half-stoned or ultra-cool or what--his eyes were barely open. Toshi, Akiyama, Taku Sugimoto, and I did our first concert there to three people or whatever it was. They then decided to do a series of monthly concerts there with this way of playing, intense concentration on quiet sound -- improvisational meetings where Toshi and Taku and Akiyama were the constant factor with one invited guest. Taku was playing guitar, either electric or semi-hollow body electric. Akiyama had a hodge-podge of electronic devices and a tabletop guitar which he sometimes played with a bow. They invited sax players, people with tape machines, Otomo or Sachiko, always different people. I know it sounds stupid to call it something like "sound-conscious music," because obviously music is about sound, but it's also about other things. It could be athletic or showbiz or conceptual or theatrical. With these guys, it was pared down to concentrating on the essence of sound. It moved away from this pulling and tugging approach to improvisational music -- the call-and-response, power playing with huge waves of sound with saxes and drummers going crazy, then getting mellow and plinking and plonking for a while, and then going back to the huge waves again. It was getting away from physicality, from instrumentality, but it was also getting away from musicality. There was an avoidance of pushing sounds, of hurrying other musicians in one direction, of competing, of fighting... One of things that made me tire of improv was that cat fight sound. Who can blow loudest and longest...

Bananafish: A lot of it reminds me of Evil Knieval's shtick.

Jason Kahn: There are some good things about "ecstatic jazz" but it wears me out. I don't want to knock anyone, but I don't like listening to it. I've played a lot of it myself but it's not what I'm interested in anymore. It was a confluence of events that allowed us all to arrive at the same place at the same time. At that first concert at Bar Aoyama, it clicked, everyone was on the same track. No one wanted to take solos, there was none of this hierarchy that you have even in free jazz.

Bananafish: From what I understand, ONKYO is a completely external term that none of the players use to label themselves.

Jason Kahn: I never heard anyone use that word when I was there. I remember when Otomo was curating a festival in Wels, Austria, there was an Onkyo Room, kind of a side-stage where solo performances took place. I don't know who named this room -- maybe it was Otomo. After this festival, the term started getting bandied about, then all of a sudden there was an onkyo scene in Tokyo, onkyo musicians... Everyone's just shaking their heads, wondering where it came from. It's good for focusing us and making it easier for people to grasp what we're doing, but as far as I know, none of the purveyors of "the classic onkyo sound" came up with it.

Bananafish: The conception of what you guys were supposed to be doing, your approach, reminds me of what AMM have said about what they've been doing for the past thirty years.

Jason Kahn: AMM are, of course, great! I don't make any claims that what I'm doing is fantastically innovative. I'm not worried about coming up with something radical.

Bananafish: Nor should you be.

Jason Kahn: If I start to ask myself if something's already been done or if people are going to like it, I might as well just stop making music. You know, someone might see the term ONKYO, unaware that the supposed adherents do not claim to be onkyo musicians, and then begin making music according to their understanding of what it means. It might not have the same impact as the original wave.

Bananafish: Or it could continue to evolve into something even better.

Jason Kahn: Exactly. It's more important not to try to be anything. But I don't even know if there is an onkyo scene anymore. Bar Aoyama has closed. I know Otomo has a jazz band going again, Toshi's back playing guitar in Taku's quartet.

Bananafish: One reason that Repeat succeeds where other musicians who are moving away from physicality, instrumentality and musicality fail is that you and Toshi haven't completely abandoned activity.

Jason Kahn: After Taku, Akiyama and Utah Kawasaki's--the group is called Mongoose-- last concert on their first tour of Europe, at Nova Cinema in Brussels, they had real problems. They played so quietly that people got pissed off. People sitting further away than the first row couldn't hear anything and were irritated that they had to concentrate so hard. Squinting your ears, so to speak, gets tiring after a while and distracts you from listening to and enjoying the music. I think that was Taku's intention. He was really trying to push it to the limit.

Bananafish: You know, I like hearing about it, and even theorizing about it. But the profundity-of-sound angle is less interesting to me than viewing it all as an exercise in perverse hilarity.

Jason Kahn: Unfortunately, it falls in line with the stereotypical Japanese predilection for pushing things to extremes. I'm not sure if I see the value in what they were doing, or if it's even interesting or necessary. When I played with them -- two-thirds of them: Utah and Akiyama -- they weren't that quiet. I think it was more Taku's intention, this vanishing away...

Bananafish: I've wrestled with it for a long time, but I hate to admit that a lot of the predominantly silent music doesn't impress me. It pains me greatly to say so. I'm all for new frontiers in absurdity.

Jason Kahn: I don't buy this whole postrock thing, either. Some of it's ok but I don't hear much that's sparkling. I remember the first time I heard Sonic Youth in 1983...

Bananafish: But how many people are going to remember the first time they heard Godspeed You Black Emperor in fifteen years?

Jason Kahn: Everyone has their own idea about when rock died. For some people it was when Nirvana signed to a major label, because punk had become marketable, even though Malcolm McLaren would have done the same thing if he'd only had a machine like Geffen backing him up...

Bananafish: I don't think any music is completely dead, until everyone on Earth has tried to play it at least once and everyone on Earth has heard it, or even if we knew what everyone on Earth would do with a given instrument. Unless no one even bothers with it anymore, then it's not dead. There's always the possibility that there's someone out there who has yet to bring a completely unexpected combination of ideas to the music.

Jason Kahn: I sort of like the fact that players using nothing but laptops pisses people off -- some guy on stage with an iBook just dinking away on a keyboard. I think that's cool. It does

question what performance means, what music means. It confronts people with their own expectations.

Bananafish: My initial reaction to performances where the only movement onstage was the musician's index finger was that it was simply bad theater.

Jason Kahn: Right, why should you have to leave your house, where you could listen to the CD? Why should you go to a concert? But what's the difference between what the guy with the iBook does and what you see sitting in the back of a big concert hall, watching a solo piano player? What do you really see there? Maybe you can detect some movement, but it's still an ant. They're both sitting in front of keyboards, yet people accept one without question but not the other. Go to a rock show, what do you see? Either the guitar player jumps around or he's planted to one spot on the stage. Why is it acceptable for Pierre Henry to set foot on stage with all his tapes, or David Tudor with a bunch of circuitry? It's not like either of them are jumping around, putting on a show.

Bananafish: How much of the material you played at the Luggage Store came from prerecorded sources?

Jason Kahn: I used a few prerecorded samples, but I'd say ninety percent of what I do is sampled and processed in real time. If a prerecorded sound file comes into play, it's just icing on the cake, something extra. Most of it is being recorded in the moment and processed in the moment. At first I was interested in what people who used laptops in performance were doing, but now I don't care. I'm just interested in how it sounds. This was a big argument a while ago. When I played at the Transmissions Festival in Chicago, more than half the music was computer-oriented.

Bananafish: Can you tell what programs are being used just by listening?

Jason Kahn: No. I'm not interested in that aspect of it, but I just can't hear it anyway.

Bananafish: Do equipment geeks get precious about it?

Jason Kahn: Some people say laptops get us out of that boy's club shop talk, but it's still there. I still get people asking me what I use and how I did this or that. It's not so different from a regular band with all the guitar geeks surrounding the guitar player after the gig. Not so long ago I played a solo laptop concert in Zurich at a pretty big dance club. The room held about a thousand people. I was the first act and I decided to play in the middle of the room. There were only about two hundred people there by that point. People could walk around me and see what I was going. Someone sitting on stage with a laptop is really alienating.

Bananafish: The things are supposed to be portable.

Jason Kahn: Yeah. Even if they're just pressing button and twiddling knobs...

Bananafish: But playing from the middle of the audience is good theater.

Jason Kahn: I saw Mimeo once; they set up in the middle of the room and the audience could see what each person in the group was doing. I think it adds a lot to this music, and allows the audience more contact with it. When I started playing, the punk thing was to remove the barrier between performer and audience; it's good to see the same attitude in the electronic scene. Are you familiar with Institut für Feinmotorik?

Bananafish: Just a couple of their records.

Jason Kahn: They set up as if they're doing an installation. They're in the middle of the space and the audience can walk around. I was curious about doing my solo tour in America. Would people be bugged by the computer onstage? Would they think what I'm doing is not expressive enough? I say only this as I still envision America as the land of the guitar, if you know what I mean. Obviously, there are loads of people here who are working with computers. But still, I didn't know what to expect. I had some positive critique; no one came up and said it sounded like shit. When I played in Chicago, a lot of people used computers, so, broadly speaking, you could expect an audience here to be sympathetic.

Bananafish: What about in Europe?

Jason Kahn: In Europe I always know what to expect and, of course, computers on stage are nothing unusual there. If you want risk, you can find it in the States. Even when I was touring with Universal Congress Of in the '80s, we were playing in places where people had never heard anything like what we were doing. It's worth it to see how people react. It makes you feel like a pioneer. I'm not trying to be pretentious; I realize there have been a lot of people before me, but there were times when you get to a town and think you're on another planet.

Bananafish: It makes you wonder why they're there to see you play in the first place.

Jason Kahn: Because there's nothing else to do. Dad's got the bar open, Thursday's are crazy music night, let's go check out the freaks.

Bananafish: And pick a fight with 'em.

Jason Kahn: Yeah, it almost came to that sometimes. But that's how you know your music is provocative, if it strikes people with a strong feeling. Rite of Spring caused riots in Paris... and think about some of John Cage's pieces. People get aggressive if they feel like they've been cheated, or they think it's bullshit, it's a charade, or it's some snake-oil salesman up there. I like that reaction, but I was quite shocked at the time. There wasn't anything radical in the instrumentation -- saxophone, guitar, bass and drums, the standard equipment of most any bar band. People would tell us they'd rather hear dogs fuck, which I took as a compliment.

Bananafish: Reading Lexicon of Musical Invective really opened my mind to writing about music. Every famous composer you've ever heard of got compared to copulating animals or buildings collapsing in their time, over and over again. But now you can say those things about music and they're not insults anymore. Fingernails on chalkboard? Great.

Jason Kahn: "Here's a CD of actual fingernails on a real chalkboard."

Bananafish: Right. In fact, compositions are routinely put down for being "too musical."

Jason Kahn: I say I wanted to move away from musicality, but I have nothing against it. If someone else's music moves me, that's all I care about. In Straight No Chaser, some dipshit is interviewing Thelonious Monk and asks him, "What kind of music do you like, Thelonious?" He says, "I like good music." And the guy says, "Do you like country and western?" Monk's looking at the guy like he's a complete moron and says, "I like good music." It doesn't matter what it is, as long as it's good. But today...

Bananafish: It's harder to tell. Was Berlin the first place you went when you left Los Angeles?

Jason Kahn: Yeah, I was on tour in Europe from September to November 1989 with Universal Congress Of. Afterwards, I stuck around and ended up visiting some friends living in Berlin. At

that point I was considering moving to New York, but when I saw Berlin in 1989, right after the wall came down, I decided to live there. It was crazy!

Bananafish: How did you start working with Arnold Dreyblatt?

Jason Kahn: I was playing with singer Amelia Cuni, the wife of sax player Werner Durand, who was working with self-made PVC pipes and who also had played in Arnold's group for several years. Amelia had lived in India for many years studying Druhpada singing. I was playing Arabic and Persian percussion with her privately, just jamming. I got to know Werner that way. Arnold had stopped the Orchestra of Excited Strings at some point and was concentrating on multimedia pieces, in particular *Who's Who in Central Europe, 1933*, which kind of got him doing the group again in 1992. He found this book, with the same title as the performance piece, at a shop in Istanbul. It was a compendium of notable people in Eastern and Central Europe; written for diplomats or business people from the U.S., traveling to that part of Europe, so they'd have some background about, you know, who the bigshots in Rumania were. A lot of the people in the book were Jewish, so as a document, it gives an interesting overview of that part of Europe prior to its decimation by the Nazis in World War II. He was interested in using this book in a hypertext sort of way, which was the basis of the piece. One person would read a short biography of someone from Rumania, and when the phrase "served in the Red Cross in Slovenia" was said, that would link you to someone from Slovenia; "Doctor so-and-so studied in Budapest," and that would link you to Budapest. It was like the Internet, but it was based around the database of this book. Incorporated into the piece were a lot of archival pictures of Eastern and Central Europe from the period, projected on a screen.

Bananafish: Where was the group?

Jason Kahn: We played behind the screen. Shelly Hirsch was singing in the group. There were three speakers who read texts from the book, sometimes at the same time as the visuals were being projected on the screen, sometimes when the music was playing, sometimes not at all. Texts were also projected on the screen with images. There were also lighting effects that were projected onto the screen, superimposed over the text and images.

Bananafish: Were you supposed to watch the text and images as they were displayed and tailor your playing to them?

Jason Kahn: Yes, in that you had to wait for certain segments to conclude before moving on. There was some flexibility, but it was pretty much completely arranged and rehearsed. The drummer cued everyone; as he sat with his back to the screen, he had to watch the images in a small monitor set up next to him. Arnold had done this piece I think in '93 and then stopped doing it. Then a week-long offer from Prague came in; their drummer, Pierre Berthet from Liege, Belgium, couldn't do it because his wife was due to have a baby at roughly the same time as the rehearsals and the performance. Werner Durand gave Arnold my name and I was called to sit in for Pierre. After Prague, they fired the cimbalom-player and asked me if I'd like to continue playing with the group on instead of drums.

Bananafish: Any idea why the other guy was fired?

Jason Kahn: Chico Mello, a nice guy, interesting composer from Brazil, was getting bored in the group. He was reading books at rehearsal and performances, during the times when he wasn't playing -- long stretches when there was no music or when other instruments were playing. He didn't have anything to do. I guess Arnold just didn't like his attitude. I liked the music, I liked Arnold and I was interested in playing with another drummer, not as a drummer. Arnold's wasn't a real cimbalom -- it was the sound board from a ship's piano, restrung and tuned according to

Arnold's tuning system.

Bananafish: How was it?

Jason Kahn: The drummer's a great percussionist, but his time wavered. Throughout my life as a musician, I've been told from time to time when I was rushing one part, dragging another; and now I got to see what it was like to play with a drummer who does that, to be on the other end, so to speak. I liked this experience. I'd never played an instrument like the cimbalom, and the music Arnold was writing was too complicated for a lot of the musicians in the group, in a way, because he was writing with an old loop program called M. Some of it couldn't be played by human beings, or only with great difficulty.

Bananafish: Like Conlon Nancarrow's piano rolls?

Jason Kahn: Exactly, but not that complicated, of course. Things like jumping four octaves, and the fact that it was his own tuning system. It wasn't just your regular Cmajor scale. It was especially difficult for the sax player.

Bananafish: His music doesn't seem terribly complicated at first glance.

Jason Kahn: Oh, it's very simple music. It rocks -- it's loud and rhythmic. He's a predecessor to groups like Sonic Youth who work a lot with overtones and alternate tuning systems. After a while sitting there playing, all these partial tones build up and the music becomes very psychedelic and spacey, in a way.

Bananafish: What sort of community was there being in Dreyblatt's group?

Jason Kahn: A lot of the people in the group were friends outside the group, but it didn't feel like being in a band, at least not like my other experiences of being in bands. For some of the people it was just a really good job. Most of them weren't professional musicians, but a couple were and acted like it. In terms of input, Arnold was not a dictator; he presented the compositions but he was open to improvement, criticism, suggestions. The original cello player Jan Scharde, argued with Arnold a lot about who the music belonged to. Scharde said it was the group's music, because they had as much to do with it as Arnold did. I didn't feel that way. I'm trying to think of a similar situation... Inside the Dream Syndicate. Okay-- this was the exact same argument. La Monte Young's position is that it was composed music, it was his concept, and the other guys were just instrumentalists playing his composition. Arnold's position was the same. He acknowledged the contributions made by the instrumentalists, but it was still his composition, his concept. Scharde had said they could go off and do concerts on their own, that they didn't need Arnold. Scharde eventually got canned, too. I don't know if it was over this. I think there were other reasons, too.

Bananafish: Survival of the fittest solves so many arguments.

Jason Kahn: Sometimes Arnold would play bass, but he didn't usually play in the group. He was mostly at the mixing board. But that Dream Syndicate fiasco -- all those guys were out of their minds on drugs, it was four-hundred years ago -- who knows what the real story was? It's certainly important to them, but from a listener's point of view, I don't think it matters. They're all well known, their places in the musical history books are assured. Whatever the billing is on this thing isn't going to change anything. People deserve better than Table of the Elements' twenty-dollar CD of third-rate recordings.

Bananafish: Well, it's a chess game to get La Monte to release something that's not embarrassing. So, before joining Dreyblatt's ensemble...

Jason Kahn: I was getting dissatisfied with the song format while I was living in Los Angeles. In 1989, Universal Congress Of was on the road for two months, then we were at home for a month, and then we did a sixty-date tour of Europe. What Universal Congress Of played was far from standard pop tunes, but it had become less creatively challenging than I would have liked. I was also playing in Cruel Frederick, which was less about free improvisation than about Black American music and the compositions of Albert Ayler and Ornette Coleman. When there was improvisation, it was very well defined and placed within certain song format-like parameters. Anyway, I moved to Berlin because there seemed to be a lot of free improvisers there. For the first two years I was there, I did a lot of touring with Dietmar Diesner, Johannes Bauer, Ernst-Ludwig Petrowsky. It was interesting going to all these little towns in what was then the DDR. They had a real tradition of free-improvised music in Eastern Germany. Jazz was accepted there in the early '60s and then outlawed for a period, which only spurred people on to develop their own approach to improvised music. Eventually I burned out on this scene.

Bananafish: Why is that?

Jason Kahn: A lot of players had their bag of tricks and were less interested in working on projects and rehearsing than in getting to the gig and playing onstage. Didn't seem like many people were taking any risks; they knew exactly how they would react in each situation, which is counter to the premise of free improv, as far as I'm concerned.

Bananafish: Derek Bailey and Evan Parker are two of the most diligent players in that regard; they're always looking for new situations.

Jason Kahn: For sure. I saw Derek Bailey in Geneva with two DJs from London. Evan Parker was doing stuff with Joel Ryan, a programmer who lives at STEIM in Amsterdam. Evan was playing and Joel was processing him in real time with a computer. A lot of the people I was playing with weren't like that.

Bananafish: It's gotta be hard after a while to find something new.

Jason Kahn: Yes, but some of them were getting spoiled. They had some fat years in the '80s. Once they got established, some of them could make a decent living playing gigs and festivals. Of course they're not going to abandon their formula; that's their trademark, their bread and butter. So, by that time I was ready to work on Dreyblatt's composed music--I really welcomed this chance; at the same time I formed Cut with guitarist Birger Lahl. I wanted to do something that involved some rehearsal, some collaboration -- not just flying into town and meeting onstage. Cut did a West Coast tour in 1995 -- that was the last time before this year that I played in California. It wasn't so good. After that tour I thought it wasn't worth playing in the U.S. We were playing in the wrong places for the music we were doing. People's reactions seemed to be "What is this? These guys are weird." In Seattle it was a generic rock club, in Portland it was a winery that put on shows occasionally. They didn't have a defined audience, but there wasn't anyone there anyway. Olympia was in the cellar of someone's house. In San Francisco it was a tiny bar in the Mission.

Bananafish: Must have been the Chameleon.

Jason Kahn: Yeah, that's right. People kind of liked it, but it was the same "what's this?" attitude.

Bananafish: Did you quit the Orchestra of Excited Strings, or did Dreyblatt kick you out for talking back?

Jason Kahn: We're still on good terms. I saw him the last time he passed through Zurich. No,

that particular configuration and the piece about Central Europe had both run their courses. The piece was getting popular, but he was feeling less comfortable with continuing to perform it. It didn't reflect what he wanted to be doing at that time -- it was a very old piece, actually. He then gave up music for a couple years and concentrated on installations and other multimedia things that are halfway between an installation and a performance. I was also doing a lot of ethnic music at the same time I was playing with the Berlin improvisers. I studied Arabic rhythms on frame drum for a year -- it's like a big tambourine without the shells -- with an oud player from Syria named Fahren Sabbagh. After that I had a grant from the City of Berlin to study in Paris.

Bananafish: What did you study?

Jason Kahn: Tombak, an Iranian drum. It's sort of like a darbuka, except it's made of wood and played with the fingers more.

Bananafish: Why would Berlin give an American money to study Iranian percussion in France?

Jason Kahn: I don't know. Every year they have a grant for quote-unquote jazz musicians. I guess I fell into that category because of the people I was playing with. I just applied and they said here's the money.

Bananafish: Who'd you study with?

Jason Kahn: adjid Khalaj. In Berlin I was also playing Turkish darabuka with a Kurdish singer named Nure. I was really into Jaki Leibzeit from Can. I read somewhere that he got a lot of the crazy rhythms he played from ethnic music. That's why Berlin gave me the money -- because I said I wanted to learn these rhythms and incorporate them into a free-improv/jazz context.

Bananafish: What's the deal with Sainkho Namtchylak?

Jason Kahn: Her whole shtick is Tuva. I'm not sure if she was born there, but at least one of her parents is Tuvan. She grew up in Russia and worked through the jazz and improvised music scene in Moscow. At some point in the '80s, she got to Germany and made a big hit, doing what she calls "pseudo -overtone singing." She's a fantastic singer, a good improviser, too. Tuvan women don't normally do overtone singing. Just the men. It's quite unusual that she's doing it, or at least simulating it. She got famous through Peter Kowald and FMP, mixing ethnic music with improvised music.

Bananafish: When did you work with her?

Jason Kahn: She was in Berlin with a DAAD grant and it was the end of her time there, early 1996. She had two friends from Tuva with her -- one guy played guitar, another played this fiddle sort of thing that he held between his legs and sang. She'd asked a drummer friend of mine to tour with her, but he couldn't do it and he recommended me. She has some crazy idea that revolved around playing at this festival in Adelaide, Australia. Because these guys were from Tuva, and had Russian passports, I guess, they couldn't get visas to stay in Germany any longer. She wanted to prepare for the Adelaide festival by playing a tour in Russia. The guitar player was into Chicago blues, the other guy was really young -- amateur, I would say -- so some rehearsing and had to be done.

Bananafish: What were you supposed to play?

Jason Kahn: Well, it wasn't very clear -- something between Tuvan and improvised music. We went to Russia for two weeks, played three concerts in Petersburg and three in Moscow. We didn't rehearse at all. Never got around to it. We just got onstage and jammed, which sort of coa-

lesced into something, but not really. It was a bit chaotic in those cities at that time. When we weren't playing, we didn't see each other. Anyway, we made it to Adelaide and did four or five gigs there. The tour ended with the young singer getting drunk and threatening to burn down our hotel and kill the guitar player. He was jealous. From there I went to Japan, did a tour with Toshi, Manu Kosugai and turntablist Tsunoda Tsugoto. It was the first time any of them had ever played outside Tokyo.

Bananafish: Where does what you're doing now, electronic processing and computers, come from?

Jason Kahn: Going to a lot of techno clubs in Berlin—East Berlin, I guess. Whenever I say Berlin, I'm probably talking about East Berlin. West Berlin was a ghost town, like something from a 1970s Fassbinder film. Standing still in time. When the wall came down, any cultural life got completely sucked out into the east. Anyway, I moved there in February, 1990, about four months after the wall came down. There were so many empty buildings in East Berlin some of which had been abandoned for as much as twenty years. It was easy to get space if you wanted to start a club, a gallery or a studio. There were clubs everywhere, springing up like mushrooms, small clubs that'd fit more than fifty or a hundred people. I wasn't interested in going to big raves, and I had a lot of friends who were DJs and producers. It was a very schizophrenic existence -- playing new music with Dreyblatt, studying ethnic music, going to dance clubs and listening to really good techno. You couldn't really go out in the street in Berlin without hearing some kind of electronic music, either from a car driving by or coming from a street or an apartment. It was in the air. Berlin from 1990 to about 1994 was really hot for techno and new electronic music in general.

Bananafish: You went to Japan at the end of the Namtchylak tour. Is that when you recorded your first album with Toshi?

Jason Kahn: No. That was one year later. At some point during the sessions for the first Repeat CD, which is mostly Toshi playing guitar -- I had a pretty minimal kit at the time with a drum pad triggering an Akai sampler -- Toshi said he'd like to try to work just with the mixing board. But it wasn't until our European tour in 1997 that the guitar became more of just a sound source for sending a signal through the mixing board. He was starting to use the mixing board more as an instrument. But the next time I was in Japan in 1998, he wasn't using the guitar at all. Before I went to Tokyo in 1998, I'd had an accident that tore the ligaments in my left foot, so I couldn't play the highhat. I ended up playing in a much simpler style than I probably would have otherwise. It put me on a different tangent, opened me up to different way of playing. That's when we recorded our second CD [Select Dialect, For 4 Ears, 1999]. Around the same time Toshi did his first CD with Sachiko M (?un", meme, 1998) He was playing mixing board and she was playing sampler, although much differently than she had in Ground Zero, where she would bring up samples of more concrete sounds. With Toshi, she started playing sine waves and clicks, or "no-input sampler," as she calls it.

Bananafish: Did she coin that phrase?

Jason Kahn: I don't know. He originally called what he was doing "sampling Toshi-self" -- using pedals to sample what he was playing through the mixing board. I've never asked him exactly how he does it. Even though I work with electronics, too, I'm not a whiz. Toshi's a true studio whiz.

Bananafish: I remember going to see Fred Frith speak a long time ago. He said something about passing a point in preparing the guitar where it no longer matter to him that it was a guitar. Likewise, Franz Hautzinger, Axel D'rner and Greg Kelley seem to be hanging onto the very periphery of trumpet-playing technique.

Jason Kahn: I was asking myself, "Why do I have this drum here?" And the answer involved getting down to what a drum is about. It's not just rhythm; it's also about the resonance of the instrument. When you record it and dissect the recording, you realize there's so much richness in that sound, as there is in any resonating body. For me what's interesting right now is the resonance of the drums and of the pieces of metal I use. I use soft mallets, so a lot of what I do doesn't have much of an attack. It's more about the sound decaying, resonating. The drum itself I don't even strike. It's there to resonate; I put cymbals and small pieces of metal on it. The floor tom is feeding into the resonations of a tureen I have mounted on a cymbal stand. Both the tom and the tureen are mic'd, so you get this cross-feedback resonance between them and the metal objects I am playing on top of the tom. But, yes, I feel like I am at the tip of what's left of the drums -- the resonance of the percussion. Though for me it still is about rhythm. The patterns which occur are very rhythmic.

Bananafish: The loops.

Jason Kahn: There are beats but they're not getting played on a drumset. Maybe MONO-RHYTHM would be the best term to describe it. I like combining drums with computer, especially when what's being played and what's being processed are indistinguishable. I recently got an email from Janek Schaefer, who's working with turntables. He said for him the technology in what I was doing was too prominent for him. This doesn't bother me, because it's a large part of what I'm doing, and I feel like I have to accept what the end result is. I'm not afraid of people hearing the drums, just as I'm not afraid if they don't hear the drums and hear the computer. There are always puritan notions about how things have to be -- either has to be an electronic sound or a residual digital sound or exclusively acoustic. I like when things are mixed, or when you hear Hautzinger, or Andrea Neumann, or Annette Krebs, and you wonder if it's acoustic or hard drive. There have been several developments in music throughout the '90s connecting electronic music to everything from dance to experimental music. You have acoustic players going in directions that almost sound electronic, and you have acoustic players incorporating electronics, and you have acoustic players who don't do any incorporating at all. In my case, I mix it up, but I have done concerts where I used just the laptop and no drums at all. That's what I did on the CD I made with synthesizer player Utah Kawasaki and guitarist Tetuzi Akiyama ("Luwa", Rossbin, 2001). I find this really interesting, too -- getting far away from the notion of physicality in musicianship. I felt like I'd taken that direction as far as I could, what with the Middle Eastern Music and the jazz improvisers and the rock bands. It's still about musicianship, because I'm hearing and reacting, but not so much about chops. I really wanted to get away from the jock attitude. Hautzinger and Dörner don't play millions of notes. They're great musicians and you can hear that what they're doing requires a lot of control and finesse, but you don't marvel at their chops. I like when the technique is transparent.