

Kathodik
Interviewed by Sergio Eletto
June 2003
www.kathodik.it

Besides your projects, music and label I,d like to know something about your moving from your home country (U.S.A.) to Europe and precisely to Berlin. Maybe in the States it was difficult for you to find the right atmosphere to well express your musical inspiration?

I moved from the US to Berlin in January 1990. At that time my decision to move was based on a combination of different factors. As you said, for what I wanted to do musically Europe definitely offered more opportunities--I wouldn't necessarily say that the listener in Europe has broader tastes than those in America; but in Europe there are many more places to perform and, of course, the arts in Europe are financially supported--which in America is nearly not the case. Beside these career factors there was the whole history of the US in the 1980's, which for me was a really repressive period. I spent much of the 1980's touring around the US with different bands. It wasn't a very nice feeling to know that if the police stopped you and found one little speck of marijuana that they could confiscate the car and everything in it--this was known as "zero tolerance." I was really glad to get out of this completely repressive environment. One other factor, which had nothing to do with music or America was Berlin. After a long european tour in the fall of 1989 I went to visit some friends in Berlin. This was November 1989. I was so impressed by the atmosphere in Berlin--this sense of jubilation and optimism--and being able to see East Germany first hand in East Berlin, that I immediately wanted to move there. I realised soon after moving that Berlin also had many very strong and varied music communities (I was interested in improvised music and the burgeoning techno scene, which at this time was anything but commercial, existing mostly in small illegal clubs).

I became familiar with your music thanks to Repeat (the band in which you collaborate with Toshimaru Nakamura). Could say something more detailed about this really prolific duo with several records out?

Well, there's not really much to say about this as Toshi and I never really had much to say about the music we played. We got along pretty well as friends and our musical interests were very similar. We started the project when Toshi was still playing guitar and I was on the drumset--not very electronic. But even in this early stage it was clear that we had a good musical affinity for each other and that the music carried itself--which is to say, we didn't have to talk about what we wanted to do, what we should play. It was a very natural project which ran its course in a very easy way.

Drum set is your main instrument, the one you started with, but the more time passes the more I am surprised about your amazing attraction for metals. It's possible to find it in Repeat and in the beautiful „Drums and Metals" is even more clear. What arouse your curiosity in all this?

My use of metals is a natural extension of the cymbals which I played with the drumset. I like the "dirty" radiation of sound: this means for me, sonic textures that are not pure, that have some noise in them. By their nature, drums produce very impure tones--they can, of course, be tuned; but not to the extent of an instrument like the violin or the piano. This taste for dirty sound carried over to the use of found metal objects. Even when I was only playing the drumset, my preference for cymbals was always for the very old Turkish-made ones--these were handmade and had a lot of sonic inconsistencies. As in all the music I play, I have a preference for the unknown, the uncertain, the sense that something could go wrong or at least not go the way one planned. Found metal objects often fulfill this desire (especially when they break!). The use of found metals--as opposed to metals made for conventional musical purposes, like cymbals--was therefore just one step further in my search for these impure sound sources. I like to

find an object and then gradually get acquainted with its sound--to find the spots where it sounds best; discover how to draw the best sound out of it. Of course, this is the same with every musical instrument one plays, but with found objects the realm for surprise always seemed greater to me. I'd like to also mention some musical experiences which opened my ears to the use of raw metals. While I was studying at the University of California Los Angeles, a few years before I even started to play the drums, I had the chance to hear a concert of percussion compositions by John Cage. This was the first time I'd seen anyone playing break drums and sheet metal! Some time later I was going to a series of new music concerts at Cal Arts. "Ionisation" by Edgar Varese was on the program. This put into context much of the music I was hearing in the experimental rock world--people like Z'ev, This Heat, Einsturzende Neubauten. A whole new sensibility was opening up for me....

On a final note, one musician who was very inspirational for me--and in connection with metals--was German drummer Peter Hollinger. He used found metal objects in a very creative way. He also brought a great rocking feeling to free improvised music. 6) Do you think new technological devices are useful to improve the situation (sound, rhythms) or you sometimes feel it would be better to go back to traditional devices that are too often forgotten by other artists exclusively into digital culture?

You mention "traditional" devices. I think that at this point in the history of music one could safely say that the computer is also a "traditional" instrument. I know so many musicians who freely move between acoustic sound sources and the computer--to a point that the two become blurred: what is acoustic, what is electronic? I think this is the beauty of what is possible today, and also why the question of whether computers or acoustic instruments should be used really irrelevant. I don't believe that computers allow us to go further in our musical discoveries; or that they enhance our creativity. We are only hampered by our imaginations--there are acoustic players who sound totally electronic; and electronic players who sound totally organic.

I think now that we have gotten past the "newness" of computers in music, especially in a live context, we can get back to dealing with sound for sound's sake--which is to say, not dependent on the device generating the sound, but on the sound itself and how we perceive it.

It's a sort of ritual question. Improvisation, that form of expression that arouse from the spontaneity of a single moment. How much is it involved in your modus operandi?

What really is improvisation? We say that people improvise, but in fact we are always drawing on a repertoire of motoric gestures and musical ideas developed over the course of many years of playing. We may not consciously pick and choose from this repertoire, but it is nonetheless there: our bag of tricks.

For me, improvisation involves placing myself in a situation where I am forced to move beyond my unconscious repertoire of collective musical experience. This is, of course, nearly impossible to do; but I try to be conscious of this aspect behind improvisation and I find that by playing in different situations with different instruments (percussion, analog synthesizer, computer) I am at least forced to move between motoric musical gesture (percussion) to the meta-musical gesture of the computer.

I don't only improvise. I also compose music and I create sound installations. Improvisation plays a large role in the live music I perform, but I have also played in many non-improvised musical situations. I don't prefer improvisation to composed music. It all depends on the final sound: does this move me, does this inspire me?

I read in one of your recent e-mail that you were about to come to Italy for some shows. What do you think about our country and about our experimental scene? I'm referring to musicians like Giuseppe Ielasi or Tu'm (whose record you were the first to promote), Alessandro Bosetti (living in Berlin too). Have you ever listened to anything? What are your feelings about?

I'm ashamed to say that I don't know all that much about the Italian experimental sound community. Back in the mid-90's I spent some time visiting Bologna and came in contact with musicians

involved in the Link project. I found this scene in Bologna very energetic, very strong.

I know Giuseppe Ielasi from a concert I organised for him and Dean Roberts in Zurich at my Sonique Serie concert series. This was a great concert.

I think that if I had the opportunity to perform in Italy I would have more contact to the different musical communities there. Unfortunately, I've so far found it very difficult to find playing situations in your country.

Where does your musical background begin? What are your idols,? I,m not referring only to academic or avantgarde figures, but also to more popular icons of rock and jazz.

My musical background began with punk rock. I started to discover music when I began going to punk rock clubs in Los Angeles in the late 1970's. Before going to these small clubs the only time I'd heard live music was in some big stadium with thousands of people and the rock gods a million miles away on a huge stage.

Seeing people up close on a small stage really inspired me to try and make my own music. This period in Los Angeles of the late 1970's--early 1980's was vibrant, with many clubs, many bands--there was something in the air. It was a very compelling time. It was also a good feeling to know that you could do something yourself: start a band, start a record label, start a club, book your own shows, buy a bus and go out on tour. Of course, later on this whole scene had its rockstars and careerists, but in the beginning it all seemed about the experience, the act. I still carry this spirit with me today, running my own label and organising concerts for myself and others.

My idols as a drummer...wow, so many. And maybe I'd rather not use the term "idol" but "inspirations." I guess the first really inspirational drummer for me, even though I didn't know it at the time because I was so young and not even playing the drums, was Hal Blaine. He was a session drummer who played on many of the California Sound 60's hits (The Beachboys, The Mamas and the Papas, Phil Spector's "Wrecking Crew," The Byrds, The Carpenters...many, many). I say that he was inspirational because I loved hearing this music as a child, especially from the car radio as I drove around Los Angeles with my mother.

Later on, when I had started playing the drums Ed Blackwell was the first drummer I'd heard who really made me think about the instrument and also about music in general. His whole approach was so melodic, so light, yet also so moving--I'd never heard so much expressed in a drummer's playing.

Mo Tucker, of the Velvet Underground, also provided me with a lot to think about. Her approach struck me by its simplicity and utter ingenuity--with the most simple of ideas she could manage to transform a song. I learned so much about subtlety and the economy of gesture from hearing her play.

You musical path goes on side to side with your label „Cut which, besides your works, releases other international names“ Jason Lescallet or the above mentioned Tu'm. Projects for the near future?

In September of this year I will release a CD by Günter Müller, Ralph Steinbrüchel and Tomas Korber--this will consist of a live recording and three remixes of this.

There are some other cut releases planned but they are not 100% confirmed yet, so I can't tell you about them.