

Musique Machine

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Interviewed by Roger Batty

Jason Kahn creates very dense, complex & often noisy, but very controlled electro/ acoustic long form pieces. His work sits in a very original sounding place between improv, noise, tense sound scaping & complex percussive composition. He's been releasing material since the late 80's and also formed the excellent cut label(that's sadly no more) to release his own work along with that of similar like minded tense sonic & precise improvisers. He's just released his new long form work "Vanishing Point" (reviewed here) on the 23 five label. Jason was kind enough to gave me a email interview.

Musique Machine: First off tells us a bit about how you first became interested in making sound? And what was your first released work?

Jason Kahn: I started going to hear punk groups in Los Angeles during the late 1970's. At this time there were many clubs, many bands, and many places to hear and play music. I got caught up in the enthusiasm of this atmosphere and decided to play the drums. I can't say why I settled on the drums as my choice of instrument, other than the fact that when I finally had the chance to sit down and play a bit I realized that I had some natural ability. Soon thereafter, around 1981, I started playing in bands.

My first solo releases were in 1999 on the Cut label. These two CD's reflected my various interests at that time: composing with acoustic percussion (the CD "Drums and Metals") and composing with electronics, environmental recordings (on the CD "Analogues").

My first appearance on record preceded these two releases by many years, as I had been on numerous LP's with groups I played with in Los Angeles during the 1980's.

Musique Machine: You mentioned your first live experience being punk bands- who did you see live at that time? And were you ever in a punk/ Post- punk band?

Jason Kahn: I saw a lot of Los Angeles groups, like Black Flag, Circle Jerk, Saccharine Trust, The Urinals, The Flesheaters, The Minutemen; when I lived in London 1980-81 I was going to see bands like The Fall (my favourite at that time; though I saw them first in Los Angeles in 1979), Gang of Four, Rip Rig and Panic, The Clash...

The first bands I played in Los Angeles were coming after punk (which I think ended around 1978) but were very much influenced by punk, either in terms of music or attitude.

Musique Machine: Noise has often been quoted in certain sectors as the new punk- what are your thoughts on that?

Jason Kahn: Well, first off I should say that I'm by no means an authority on the current noise scene, in all its variations; but what little I'm aware of does seem to have some things in common with punk, primarily in terms of the d.i.y. attitude (cassette labels, self-organized

shows, etc). But beyond this I can't see what other similarities there might be.

Musique Machine: I was very sad when you decided to close your label Cut in 2008- as you always released very consistent & rewarding production that was interestingly designed with your screen printed art design covers- please tell us why you formed the label in the first place & why ultimately you decided to close it down?

Jason Kahn: My initial reasoning for starting Cut was to publish my own work. I soon realized that there was a lot of other great music out there with no platform and decided to start releasing recordings from other artists whose work inspired me.

I stopped the label quite simply because I no longer had the time to run it properly. I've become busier with my own work (with much more travelling) and my family has grown (I have three children). There are just not enough hours in the day to accomplish everything. Cut was, unfortunately, the first to go.

Musique Machine: On the subject of cut are the titles still in print now from the label & if not how do people go about getting hold of copies of certain releases?- have you ever thought of reissue stuff from the label on another label or making them available on line as downloads?

Jason Kahn: Cut CD's are only available from certain distributors (listed on the Cut distribution page at the website). I think one could still manage to find all the releases by asking around at different distributors. I have no plans for any re-releases or as downloads. Many distributors are still holding copies of Cut CD's and I don't want to make it more difficult than it already is for them to sell their remaining copies by putting Cut recordings on-line.

Musique Machine: following on from the last question what's are your thoughts on Downloads- in particular when often your work & the work you released on Cut has a very visual & often texture side to it?

Jason Kahn: I think downloads are very good for certain purposes. One thing I've noticed, having played in countries where the local people, because of world economics, are literally priced out of purchasing any CD's produced in Europe or North America, is that download releases are a good way for "all people" (those with internet access, that is) to be able to hear one's work.

I think some of my best work has been released on line, by the way.

Musique Machine: Can you list the five favourite releases you put out on Cut & why are they your favourites?

Jason Kahn: No, I can't think of these CD's in terms of favourites. Each CD at its time of release was my favourite. I look at Cut as a complete body of work, so it is hard for me to break it down into individual components. I only ever released work which really moved me, so you can just assume that all the CD's were my favourites and still are.

Musique Machine: Your new work Vanishing Point is in memory of your daughter- I know it's personal & possibly distressing for you, but how did she die & why did you tribute the piece to her?

Jason Kahn: Louise's death was diagnosed as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (this is when babies simply stop breathing in their sleep).

I dedicated this CD to her because it wouldn't have been made without her. As I am a musician, quite naturally what happens in my life often finds an outlet or transposition in my work. This was the case with "Vanishing Point" which was a reflection on the life and death of my daughter.

Musique Machine: Still on the subject of Vanishing Point- it has at times a very warming & lush melody under your normal tense use of sound- why did you decide to use such a melodic element & will you use more melodies in your future work?

Jason Kahn: I can't really say why I decided on one element (melody) over another. And even in terms of melody this is certainly not the first time that it has appeared in my work. I grew up listening to pop music on the radio and still enjoy lots of melodic music. It comes as no surprise to me that melody is there in my work, but why exactly I can't say. I don't approach my compositions in a very conceptual or even cognitive way. I'm just working in the dark, as it were, feeling my way slowly to a conclusion. I can't say what my future work will hold.

Musique Machine: It's implied that Vanishing Point took quite sometime to write & compose- how long did it take & what was your sonic starting point with piece?

Jason Kahn: I think altogether "Vanishing Point" took around one year to finish. Though there is material used in the composition which I had already recorded over ten years ago. The starting point for the piece was part of a recording from a February 2008 solo concert in San Francisco at the Activating the Medium Festival.

Musique Machine: Do you think the way you make a piece has changed over the years? I.e. equipment, way of composition?

Jason Kahn: I don't think my actual approach to composition has changed very much over the years. I have often used bits of live recording, environmental recording, percussion (all elements on "Vanishing Point" as well as other solo works of mine); and I still focus on slowly changing structures and fields of sound. Perhaps my work has become denser, if anything. Maybe the biggest procedural change would be the use of graphical scores for groups of musicians. But this doesn't apply to acousmatic pieces like "Vanishing Point." My equipment has changed over the years, but also not that much. I still compose with computer. Perhaps the only real change has been the switch to analog synthesizer for live performance and the use of better microphones for recording.

Musique Machine: Your work has often a very controlled use of noise in it- do you enjoy more formal & chaotic noise for example Merzbow, Wolf eyes, etc?

Jason Kahn: I've heard John Wiese, Aaron Dilloway, etc in concert and I wouldn't say that their approach is that chaotic. And I'm not so sure how controlled my approach is as things can get pretty out of hand when playing live (exploding screeching feedback, etc). On "Vanishing Point" everything sounds controlled because it is controlled. "Vanishing Point" is composed to hard disk, thereby everything is under control. But to answer your question... Yes, I like all kinds of noise, controlled, un-controlled: the sound of ventilator shafts, idling diesel motors, wind blowing through the trees, trains passing over a bridge, water dripping and, yes, even Masami Akita!

Musique Machine: What are you working on a present & would you like to play Vanishing point in live setting & would this be possible with pieces many layers?

Jason Kahn: Right now I'm finishing up some collaborative works. I've already started recording new material for another solo piece but I still need more time to think about what I want to do. It is hard for me to move on after "Vanishing Point." I'm not so sure how interesting it would be for people to experience Vanishing Point live. There would be nothing for me to do in this case but to press the "start" button and sit back to listen. If some curator could imagine this being of interest to an audience, then I would gladly push that start button. Otherwise, I am generally more interested in performing live within the context of relations to different acoustical spaces, using percussion and analog synthesizer. This puts me in a position of risk and danger which I feel better translates to a more memorable concert experience, both for myself and the listener.

Musique Machine: Can you give us any more details on the collaborative works you working on? And who have you still like to collaborate with?

Jason Kahn: I've just finished mixing recordings with Joe Colley, Günter Müller/Norbert Möslang, Günter Müller/Christian Wolfarth, and Tim Catlin. And there will be some more to do after these with new recordings with Richard Francis, Adam Sussman, Jon Mueller. I don't really think too much about who I would like to collaborate with. Most of my collaborations haven't been planned out. They just came together more by chance. This being said, I'm really looking forward to playing with Manuel Mota in Portugal later this month. We've been meaning to play together for a long time, but could never find the chance till now.