

Tokafi

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Interviewed by Tobias Fischer

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Each year, thousands of artists from around the world are moving to Berlin. Their goal: Finding inspiration in one of the planet's most exciting capitals and tapping into a vibrant community of artists. The momentum is real, the hype still thoroughly justified. And yet, for better or worse, much of the once adventurous spirit of the city has been lost. Zurich-based musician, visual artist and writer Jason Kahn is one of those who can testify to just how different things were in the early 90s, when brutally loud techno and whispery improv were turning decrepit apartment buildings and empty warehouses into dark temples of music. Kahn's arrival to Berlin, barely three months after the fall of the wall, coincides with the rise of the aforementioned genres and marks the beginning of an important phase in his career: the shift away from being a drummer in a more traditional vein to a sound explorer approaching percussion mainly from a sonic, timbral and sculptural perspective. How much of this development was really down to the influence of post-cold-war Berlin is hard to determine in retrospect. One thing's for sure, however: The prevalent mood of departure and anything-goes would leave its mark on everyone who experienced this time first-hand. For tokafi, Jason Kahn takes a look back at this phase, trying to uncover the links between the city as a space for creativity and his personal path as an artist.

The changes in my approach to playing the drums were part of a longer process, starting pretty much when I arrived in Berlin. Repeat (a duo with Toshimaru Nakamura) was the first project where I was able to integrate everything I had been developing. The second Repeat CD ("Temporary Contemporary" on Four4Ears) was actually recorded in Tokyo after I had already moved from Berlin to Geneva. But perhaps this recording could be seen as the musical culmination of my nearly nine years living in Berlin.

Looking back on the time in Berlin, it now seems strange to me how everything came together. I had moved to the city, thinking I wanted to focus more on free improvisation. I had been playing in a rock group (Universal Congress Of) which had enjoyed some notoriety in Germany, so I wasn't known as a free improviser. And what I actually discovered upon moving to Berlin in February 1990 was that the most interesting things happening for me were in the area of electronic dance music, not improvised music.

Right after I arrived in Berlin I was at Tacheles (an old abandoned department store in Berlin Mitte which had been squatted and turned into artists studios, a cinema, a club, etc.) for a concert and ran into an old friend of mine from Los Angeles, the artist and musician Brad Hwang. I met Brad when I was living at The American Hotel in downtown Los Angeles (a former transient hotel, converted into a rooming house of for artists—where I also first met Joe Baiza) in the mid-1980's. We hadn't seen each other for several years and were both like, "What are you doing here?!" Brad was there with a friend of his, Mo Loschelder. Mo had also just moved to Berlin. She had started DJ-ing and producing her own music. We became friends and through her I was able to learn about the underground dance scene in Berlin. This was my introduction to the sounds and structures of electronic dance music (in this case, Techno). Up till then I hadn't had much exposure to this kind of music in Los Angeles, where I had grown up and was still living in before moving to Berlin. I was a drummer playing in rock bands, starting to find my

way in free improvisation. I didn't have the exposure to this kind of music, although I know now that, for example, Detroit Techno was already a precursor from many years before to the sounds in Berlin.

Refreshing approaches

The pared down approach to rhythm and the idea of process as musical material in Techno were refreshing to me. I lacked the wherewithal to make this kind of music myself but I would say the gist of it appealed to me and I somehow wanted to integrate this aesthetic into my playing. Aside from the rhythmic aspect of the music I was also interested in the use of sampled sounds. This wasn't as new to me, having heard so much hip hop, but perhaps combined with the rhythmic properties I found a new interest in trying to integrate this into my playing. At this point, though, samplers were still too large and expensive for me to consider using them for live work and the first laptops powerful enough to use as sound tools were still a few years away. I also became interested in Middle Eastern drumming. In Los Angeles I had studied about African music as a student at the University of California Los Angeles. My interest in Jazz led me back to its roots and I spent several years really interested in Nigerian and Ghanaian drumming. The focus on Middle Eastern music really only occurred after moving to Berlin. During my first year there I lived in an apartment in the Naunynstrasse in Kreuzberg. This is a Turkish neighborhood. Everyday I was immersed in the sound of this community's music. Several times over that year I would be walking around the neighborhood and hear what sounded like a party going on in one of the buildings, with drumming and people singing. I'd go in the building to see what was going on and discover a wedding party in full swing. As soon as I'd poke my head in the door someone would wave at me to come in. And so, there I would be, experiencing this amazing music. Even after moving from this apartment I kept my practice studio in the cellar until I moved to Switzerland, so this soundtrack of Turkish music pretty much accompanied me through my entire stay in Berlin.

But what I ended up actually studying was Arabic music with Farhan Sabbagh, an oud player from Homs, Syria. I was interested in playing the frame drum (daf), which appealed to me more than the Turkish darabuka. One of my great inspirations in drumming had been Jaki Liebezeit (of Can), who played all these crazy asymmetrical rhythms while still making them sound really groovy. I'd read that he took many of these rhythms from Middle Eastern music. I wanted to try the same approach, somehow integrating this with my interest in Techno and improvisation. So, for a little more than two years I studied the daf and tried to bring this rhythmical approach into my playing on the drum set.

In 1993 I recorded a CD with Günter Heinz, a trombonist from East Germany. This was another one of those formative experiences, as Günter worked extensively with live electronics. So, as we were recording Günter's sound was being processed by an engineer working with us. Of course, in the history of contemporary music this was nothing new, but for me this was the first time I'd had the opportunity to experience this first hand as a player and not just as a listener. This use of electronics, outside the context of dance music, started me thinking about other ways of integrating electronics into my playing—not just with sampled sounds but with the actual transformation of the sound at hand from my instrument. I started working in this direction at the end of the 1990's (after I'd moved from Berlin), when the first powerful laptops became available, enabling real time sound processing.

The advent of samplers

Not long after these two events coincided which made it possible for me to start working with more electronics. The first was the advent of cheap samplers. I was able to buy a Yamaha SU20 sampler and, as limited as this was, it got me on the road to bringing electronic sounds into my playing. Around the same time my Sony Walkman broke down and I took it to a shop in Neukölln to have it repaired. The owner of this shop also made his own binaural microphones for Walkmans. I bought a pair of these and this got me started with recording environmental sound and integrating this into my playing with the sampler. Although I probably didn't think of it at that time in these terms, I was now decontextualising the recorded sounds and approaching the practice of *Musique concrète*, using these recorded sounds as sound objects and inserting them in my playing as I would the actual physical objects of my drum set.

Aside from the advent of electronics in my playing, there was still a great community of acoustic drummers performing regularly in Berlin which made me re-think my approach. One of these musicians was Peter Hollinger. He came more from rock music but played almost exclusively in improvised contexts. He also did solo concerts, playing a piece called "Koffersuite," where he used all sorts of bits of metal and other "non-musical" objects, performing sitting on the floor. This reminded me of the work of Z'ev, though on a more reduced scale. I also admired the fact that Hollinger could bring the energy of rock music into the context of free improvised music. This spoke to my background and was really inspiring for me. Another drummer who I often heard in Berlin, though at the time he wasn't living there, was Paul Lovens. In Los Angeles I'd only known his work through recordings. Now that I was living in Berlin I had the chance to hear him many times and his approach really opened me up to many new ideas—not just the material he used but his thinking about structure. His playing was very pared down in a way but also maximal in its freedom and diversity.

In 1994 another of those propitious experiences occurred for me when the American composer and artist Arnold Dreyblatt asked me to play in his group "The Orchestra of Excited Strings." His drummer, Pierre Berthet, couldn't do a series of upcoming performances in Prague due to the fact that his wife was about to give birth to their first child. Arnold didn't know me before this but the saxophone player in his group, Werner Durand, did. For around a year before this I'd been coming to Werner's house to play with his wife Amelia Cuni, who was a singer in the Dhrupad tradition of Indian classical music. I met Amelia through my daf teacher Farhan Sabbagh. Slowly I began to feel a part of a musical community, if not from outward appearances a very disparate one.

In Arnold's group I had to strip my playing down even further. Mostly I just played the snare drum and bass drum, occasionally a cymbal or wood block. The pieces were composed but elastic, meaning that the changes from one section to another were called by different players in the group (often the drummer). Arnold liked to joke that his music was in "1/1" time signature, which more often than not had a very steady 1/8 note pulse coupled with some march rhythms, all of this set to a harmonic system based on just intonation, which when played at a certain volume (and in this group the volume sometimes became very loud) had a certain psychedelic effect of swirling overtones and inner ear reverberations.

A view beyond the drums

After the series of Prague concerts the cimbalom player Chico Mello left the group and Arnold asked me to take his place. This would be the first time that I played in a group not sitting

behind the drums, which was really an eye opening experience for me. I was now dealing with the rhythm of just my two hands, playing cells of different rhythms coupled with each chord of the given composition. When I first started to learn the drums I spent a year just on a practice pad learning rudimental drumming (marches, etc). Playing the cimbalom echoed back to this and I really enjoyed the simplicity of repeating these cellular rhythms over and over again until Pierre Berthet gave the signal to move on to the next chord of a composition. In a way, this wasn't that far from the ideas I'd been hearing in Techno, also dealing with cells of rhythm, phasing and layering.

A bit before starting to play with Arnold I formed the project "Cut" with Birger Löhl, a rock guitarist from Hannover. The modus operandi of this group was to bring improvisation together with structures built upon cells of rhythm. I was playing a lot of the rhythms I'd been studying in Arabic music and using the idea of repetition and process taken from Techno. And into this I wanted the element of improvisation and flexible structures. I think there was no audience for this type of music at the time, so we had it pretty rough finding gigs. But we persevered and recorded one seven inch single and CD as a duo. The group expanded to a trio with Swiss saxophonist Gregor Hotz in 1997. We recorded one last CD as a trio and then the group disbanded in 1998.

I was now spending a lot of time traveling back and forth to Hannover for rehearsals with Cut and going to Paris to study Iranian drumming on the tombak with Madjid Khaladj. This was on a grant from the Arts Council of Berlin (Senat) and, once again, I wanted to try bring the rhythms of Iranian classical and folk music into my playing on the drum set.

In 1995 I met Toshimaru Nakamura when we played in the same group providing the music for a butoh performance in Tacheles (actually, in retrospect, if it were not for Tacheles so much during my life in Berlin probably wouldn't have happened. For several years this place was very important for the artistic community in Berlin). Shortly thereafter we started working together. I went to Japan several times and Toshi had started coming to Europe. We released our first CD "Repeat" in 1997. By this time I was using a full-size sampler and a drum pad to trigger it. But still, the music on "Repeat" was a far way off from our second CD "Temporary Contemporary." "Repeat" was quite active, perhaps having more to do with much of older forms of free improvised music. I think both Toshi and I were still grappling with how to synthesize all our newfound ideas (Toshi was still playing guitar on this recording, for example).

It took another two years before we both came to that place where we could create something new for ourselves and in the context of the music happening around us at that time. "Temporary Contemporary" was, for me at least, the fruition of the 1990's, bringing all I experienced in Berlin to a unified form. This probably had as much to do with Berlin as Tokyo, as my trips to Japan throughout the 1990's also played a strong role in my development, having the opportunity to play with Taku Sugimoto, Tetuzi Akiyama, Otomo Yoshihide and many others. But that would be another story...

A direct role

I guess looking at all this in the context of "space" one could easily deduce that the extraordinary situation of Berlin right after the wall came down played a direct role in my own development as a musician. For one thing, much of East Berlin had vast amounts of residential, industrial and retail space sitting empty. When I came to Berlin almost none of my friends payed rent for their apartments, studios, clubs or galleries. And if they did pay, it was next to nothing. With the

pressure of money gone an extremely creative atmosphere prevailed, especially I would say around the time period 1990–1992. Most of the underground dance music I heard took place in clubs in East Berlin. And this went for improvised music as well. For me, West Berlin was like a ghost town. The real artistic community was in the East. In the DDR improvised music held a special place and was actively supported by the state. This meant that even after the fall of the wall many clubs and community centers in East Berlin still lingered on (but not for very long, unfortunately). This gave me many more playing opportunities than if I had just been living in West Berlin before the wall came down (not to mention Los Angeles). And the same was true for much of the former DDR, in large and small cities there were so many places to play (and even be paid) that I was able to gain a lot of experience as an improviser, playing with people like Dietmar Diesner and Johannes Bauer.

I found the community of musicians I met in East Berlin much more supportive than in western half of the city. Living in East Berlin were not just musicians from the former DDR but also west Germans and people from all over the world who had come to Berlin like myself to experience the moment of change. I just remember people being really helpful and supportive in general, whether one needed assistance in finding a place to live, to start a club, open an art space. The only pressure I can recall was that of trying to take it all in, there was so much going on. West Berlin, on the other hand, was almost relaxing in its lethargy. But in the end I always found its atmosphere stifling. Places to play there were so delineated: rock, jazz, world music. In East Berlin, most spaces for live music featured many different types of work. Everything felt much more open in East Berlin than in the West. And I think this encouraged me to try out more directions in my own work. For sure the whole idea of bringing electronic music into my playing would probably never have occurred to me had I been living in West Berlin before the wall came down.

I remember going to the Hard Wax record store when it was located in the Reichenbergerstrasse in Kreuzberg, not far from my apartment in Treptow. My friend Mo worked there. I would often go there hang there for a while as she and the staff played all this great music. Then I would go out at night (more often than not in East Berlin) to some club as a listener or a performer. And the next day I would be back in my studio trying to make sense of all this, assimilating all this different input.

Energy without Internet

All of this was right before the time when the Internet took off, but still at this point there was for all intents and purposes no Internet being used for social organization in the circles I moved in. All this great creative surge of energy happened without forums or blogs or wiki's or Twitter or Facebook. People met in bars and clubs or on the street and the word spread around. Where I lived in East Berlin there were still no telephone lines installed. I didn't have a phone at home and mobile phones were not an affordable reality yet. But still, people would take the time to come by and leave a note on my door if I wasn't there. And the whole of East Berlin worked this way!

One of the factors which ironically drove me from Berlin in the end was the very artistic community which I once found so energizing and inspiring. Cities are open systems but it's not just about input from the Internet or from visiting artists who add to the creative environment of a city, it is more I believe the indigenous population having its influence on the visiting artists. And in the end, what I noticed about Berlin was this huge gap opening between the artistic

community and the indigenous people from Berlin. Many of the people I noticed coming to Berlin had nothing to do with Berlin other than having their studio there or finding cheap places to live and go out at night. I knew so many foreign artists who didn't show the slightest interest in learning German, even after living many years in Berlin. So, not only was the city being eaten alive by political priorities and land developers, but it was being inundated with all these people from around the world who had so little interest in the place they came to live. And, quite frankly, this really began to drag me down after a while. As recently as a few years ago, long after I'd moved from Berlin, I met this woman on a residency who still lived there. And she could not stop telling me how marvelous the city was, how "she only knew artists there." And where did she live in Berlin? Neukölln! One of the areas with the highest crime and poverty rates in all of Germany!

Nonetheless, I feel sad now that this space is gone or, better said, relegated to the space of memory. But I'm glad that I had the chance to experience it all while it still existed.