

«The Improvisation Meeting at Bar Aoyama»

Liner Notes to the CD

1999

Reset 002

I played at Bar Aoyama in October of 1998. I was in Tokyo to give some concerts and record with Toshimaru Nakamura in our project Repeat. This was my third trip to Japan and I was no longer surprised by any flash peeks into western mirror worlds: blues bars in Wakayama, late-night Denny's coffee shops in Kobe, picture-perfect rockabilly poseurs playing air guitar in Yoyogi park. But Bar Aoyama was different. Probably because it appeared out of nowhere: no neon sign, not even a light over the door (later we borrowed a light bulb from the ceiling inside the club: now only one light inside--darker--but at least one light outside: maybe someone could find the club...). From the outside, Bar Aoyama looked like a forgotten concrete bunker: no windows, one steel door, old fliers peeling away in the wind. Like a secret end of 70's-era Los Angeles punk club or post-wende Ost Berlin techno squat. In a way it all felt very familiar. Going inside I felt even more at home, instantly displaced from all the shining chrome and glass in Shibuya. Bar Aoyama is a dank, musty, low-ceilinged concrete dive. It smells of stale cigarette smoke, empty beer bottles growing moldy, bags of trash turning sour--I might have been in Prenzlauerberg or the East Village. There was no stage, and not even really any place to set up and play. I kept hitting my head on pipes running the length of the concrete ceiling. If this all sounds vaguely uncomfortable and foreboding, it wasn't: I couldn't wait to play.

Toshi and I unpacked our instruments and went back outside. Traffic streamed in and out of the Aoyama Tunnel. A strange looking guy sat on the steel railing separating the sidewalk from the racing cars. I say strange because I had never seen anyone like this in Japan before: floppy black hat, old two-sizes-too-big black jacket, beaten up guitar case, scuffed leather shoes with no shoelaces. This was Taku. His friend Masai stood off to the side, taking pictures. We'd all never met before. Taku didn't say much. I found out later that this had less to do with language barriers as with the fact that Taku never says very much. A few minutes later someone rode up on a bicycle loaded down front and back with bags and cases. This was Akiyama. He'd ridden all the way from his house in Setagaya: around 90 minutes! He was sweating and out of breath. I'd met him the year before at the Penguin House in Koenji.

Back inside we somehow managed to make room and set up our instruments. After a five-minute sound check we were ready to go. Except for us and the bartender, Yahagi-san, the club was empty. I went out to find something to eat. When I came back, we had an audience of four people. I ordered a drink. Yahagi-san seemed to work away with eyes closed, breaking ice by hand with a huge icepick. I was thinking that there was no reason to add more sound to what was already going on in the club: upstairs, the bass drum continued on its merry way, four to the bar; outside, traffic surged in and out of the tunnel; but the best sound, and maybe the sound I would liked to have heard above all the others, was the ventilation system--a combination of humming electricity and the oddly syncopated rhythms of mechanical parts on the verge of breakdown. If anything, perhaps this old air conditioner became my inspiration for the evening. If I couldn't hear it on it's own then I would at least--

subconsciously--try to approach its feeling through my own music.

Listening to the recordings of this evening it was obvious that what we played sounded very little like the air conditioner. But, perhaps, it was music which didn't intrude on these other sounds; didn't impose its presence on the natural balance of Bar Aoyama's aural environment. We played a music that, like the air conditioner, didn't necessarily go anywhere; a music that spread out and filled the room, cross-fading in and out of Aoyama's original sounds.

The night was done. We packed up our instruments. The ventilation system was turned off, Yahagi-san stopped chipping away at the block of ice, the traffic outside had thinned down to the odd late-nighter racing back to the suburbs, and even the turntables upstairs had stopped spinning.