

The Sound of Things to Come

Inside the musical mind of Holger Czukay

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“We wanted to be something impossible becoming possible,” remembers Holger Czukay, co-founder of the German group Can, on the phone from his apartment in Cologne. The group’s first albums came out over four decades ago, but today Can still sounds like the impossible made possible. The music still feels potent and disorienting, suffused with power and mystery. And Czukay’s many solo albums and collaborations after Can still sound as beguiling as they did when they were originally released.

Czukay is now 75 years old. He comes across as lovably eccentric, quick-witted, and curious. He loves talking about his late mentor and friend, the wily avant-garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, but he also enjoys talking about comedian W. C. Fields (“a really funny guy—he’s my big hero!”).

In addition to being Can’s primary bass player, Czukay was also the leader of the band’s explorations into new sonic territories. He and keyboardist Irmin Schmidt had both trained with Stockhausen in the ’60s, and Czukay brought his classical training and his wide-ranging, idiosyncratic outlook to Can, becoming

the band’s inventive sound engineer and its ace tape editor. His talent with editing, in particular, made him a tremendous asset to a group known for their voluminous output and extended jams.

“I was always mostly interested in people who were ahead of [their] time, all the time,” Czukay tells me. He was obsessed with music from a young age. During the Second World War, his family was among the many refugees who fled Poland for West Germany. As a child, he gravitated to the local church, not because he was seeking religious solace but because it was a place where he could absorb himself in sound. “In the war—or after the war, even—it was the only place I could go where I could hear music,” he recalls. Can’s late guitarist, Michael Karoli, once told Czukay that whatever he played came out sounding like church music.

Czukay was always in search of new sounds. He became known as a technological innovator, going to elaborate lengths to sample with tape long before the digital revolution made sampling easy and ubiquitous in the ’80s. His sampling chops were on display most strikingly in his solo projects and collaborations





Holger Czukay on some of his world travels throughout the years.

outside of Can, including the world-music collage *Canaxis* (1969), with Rolf Dammers, and the solo album *Movies* (1979).

“I was starting to think digitally before I had a digital device,” he says. “I didn’t know digital devices. But by splicing ... you can imitate the digital world. That’s how I did it, with the analog machinery ... by working on *Canaxis*. I found the possibility: how to play analog, and compose digital.”

To make *Canaxis* in 1968, Czukay swiped leftover magnetic tape, which was scarce and expensive in those days, from Stockhausen’s studio. He used this to craft giant tape loops, which he wrapped precariously around beer bottles. He and Dammers recorded the album in four manic hours one night in the studio, while Stockhausen was asleep; David C. Johnson, one of the composer’s assistants, sneaked them into the building.

Canaxis, released in 1969, was Czukay’s astonishing entry into the world of sampling. The track “Boat Woman Song” was a cosmic collage of vocals culled from a 1965 Folkways LP called *Music from Vietnam* melded with Flemish choral music from the Renaissance. “With *Canaxis*, [I thought,] how could music from other countries fit in with what I could imagine as European music?” Czukay says. “The church composer from the twelfth century, with someone from Vietnam, from the rice fields probably, and they both worked perfectly together.” Stockhausen had already explored

merging the music of the world in pieces like *Telemusik* (1966), in which he aimed to reach a “universality of past, present, and future, of distant places and spaces.” But Czukay’s music was less formal and conceptual than Stockhausen’s. It was scrappier, more rock ‘n’ roll.

Czukay’s omnivorous, DIY approach to music was similar to his fellow “non-musician” and future friend Brian Eno. Like Eno, Czukay was adept at weaving lofty ideas from the avant-garde into the fabric of rock and pop music. “I was not so much thinking with my head,” Czukay says. “I was also thinking like a beginner—someone who is innocent in starting something, and thinking, ‘Oh, that’s musical.’ ... Stockhausen was thinking. He was thinking to expect what he had in his mind.”

Stockhausen remained a lifelong friend of Czukay until Stockhausen’s death in 2007. He had a reputation for being dour and intimidating, but to Czukay, he was friendly, sometimes hilarious, and deeply committed to his music. “He could be funny,” Czukay recalls. “Most of the time he was very serious. He was fighting for the music; he was fighting like a lion.” The Beatles paid lip service to the great composer, citing him as an inspiration for their experiments in tape editing in the late ‘60s. They put his face on the famous cover of *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* in 1967, and invited him to visit them at Abbey Road Studios, an offer Stockhausen declined. “I asked him, ‘Why didn’t you go and

see The Beatles when they invited you?” Czukay says. “He said, ‘I don’t have time.’”

This was certainly true. In the ’60s, Stockhausen was at the height of his powers, composing groundbreaking music at a furious clip. He “was always inventing,” Czukay remembers. Many of his most legendary works (*Gesang der Jünglinge*, *Kontakte*, *Mikrophonie I* and *II*, *Kurzwellen*, *Telemusik*, and *Hymnen*, for starters) were produced during this fruitful period in the ’60s. It was an exciting time to be in the composer’s orbit, but Czukay knew that he had to break away in order to seek out his future. “Stockhausen had told me ... ‘I think you should leave this and search for something new,’” Czukay says. “He was encouraging me to leave him, and to find something new—and that was Can.”

Czukay moved to Switzerland to meet women. (The rich women were in Switzerland, he says with a chuckle.) He succeeded in this, but perhaps more fortuitously, he met Michael Karoli, who would become Can’s guitarist. The two soon connected with Irmin Schmidt and Johnson, colleagues from Czukay’s Stockhausen days (Johnson played in Can in the early days, but quit while Schmidt stayed on). Czukay didn’t know Jaki Liebezeit, who would soon become Can’s incredible drummer, but he was aware of him as a jazz musician. (“He was playing jazz with Chet Baker,” Czukay marvels.) “So we met together,” Czukay says, “and suddenly, four people are together, just like, snap! There we are. No plans—it was by pure fate.”

It’s funny to hear Czukay talking about Can in retrospect; he makes it all sound so easy. The band’s ascent to cult stardom in the ’70s seemed tumultuous to outsiders, as the band’s lineup shifted and vocalists got swapped. But Czukay says the members of Can all got along with each other, for the most part. Fights were rare. They were all a bit older and more experienced than many of their contemporaries in the other krautrock bands, who would sometimes hit them up for advice. “I knew Kraftwerk very well, Ralf Hütter and Florian [Schneider],” Czukay tells me. “Florian was calling me at night sometimes, and asking me to give advice and so on, so we were pretty good friends. But Kraftwerk was very different from Can. Can was an open, living thing—a band. Kraftwerk was a concept, a design. It was made by thinking. It became an art piece, a piece of art. But I was never interested in an art which exists by thinking.”

As the ’70s progressed, Czukay continued to de-

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—HOLGER CZUKAY

velop his talents as a tape virtuoso, cutting and splicing and looping with incredible skill, and working with the 16-channel multi-track recorder that Can had acquired. When Rosko Gee took over on bass in 1977, Czukay was freed up to work as a sonic tinkerer on stage as well as in the studio. He made use of common consumer electronics, such as radios, telephones, and Dictaphone tape recorders, harnessing them to make otherworldly sounds.

In the later days of Can (but well before digital samplers were invented), Czukay created, in effect, a homemade sampler by connecting a shortwave radio to a Morse code tapper, which allowed him to trigger random samples on the fly. During live performances, he caught the celestial transmissions of shortwave radio—a female vocal, snatches of an ethereal melody—and seamlessly inserted them into the flow of the band’s music.

When Czukay left Can, toward the end of the ’70s, he went even deeper into sampling shortwave radio, using the rich, mysterious radio broadcasts to help fill in the blanks left by the absence of a full band. One night, he suddenly found his vocalist. “It happened when I turned on the shortwaves,” he says. “I didn’t know that it was Iran. A really beautiful couple was singing—that came through. And I thought, wow, how does this music go together?”

The track that emerged out of those fleeting transmissions would become one of his best-known solo songs, “Persian Love.” Czukay paired the vocals with a lilting rhythm. The ornate Iranian vocal lines rub up against a minimalist Western backbeat, and the result is enchanting and strange. The Iranian singers, Czukay says, were “not really in sync; they were just in sync



by chance, or by whatever you think it was. It could be magic, a kind of magic ... sometimes

there have to be two sides who come together, to make something most interesting.”

Movies, the album containing “Persian Love,” was released in 1979. “There was no [digital] sampling of course,” Czukay says. “I had a normal tape recorder—nothing special. It was an old tape recorder from the radio station they were throwing away. And I know these tape recorders are very stable ... they work forever, like horses. And that was how I did it. I was editing the tapes, splicing the tapes like crazy. It was only analog ... I thought it was really ahead of its time, when I was making ‘Persian Love’ and ‘Hollywood Symphony’ and ‘Cool in the Pool,’ even.”

“Persian Love” was deeply inspiring to Eno; you can hear traces of that inspiration in *Fourth World: Possible Musics* (1980), made with Jon Hassell, and in his landmark 1981 collaboration with David Byrne, *My Life*

in the Bush of Ghosts. “[Eno] was really interested in the way ‘Persian Love’ was recorded,” Czukay says, “And the way I was working with Can also, trying to bring different works together in music. He was working with [Byrne], he was trying to make his own way, he was influenced by what I had done before.”

A string of other Czukay albums followed *Movies*, as well as a raft of collaborations with artists ranging from David Sylvian and The Edge to Conny Plank and Jah Wobble. Records like *On the Way to the Peak of Normal*, *Les Vampyrettes*, *Der Osten Is Rot*, *Full Circle*, and *Snake Charmer* are all packed with inspired ideas, each leading in intriguing new directions. Czukay remains prolific to this day, working on remixes of his former recordings and collaborations. But he’s modest, too.

“I am not making the music; it is going through me,” he tells me. “I never thought, ‘I am doing that.’ Stockhausen was thinking the same. He was becoming an instrument for his compositions ... he always understood himself as being an instrument for something higher than he is.”

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