

**'Cassiber Recalled' in Cassiber 1982-1992
CD-Box Set & Book
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by Dr. Kersten Glandien

My first encounter with Cassiber rendered me speechless for days. Nothing had prepared me for this. The music impacted like lightning on my placid East-German life. One cold winter's night in February 1983 I attended, by accident, the group's first concert in East Berlin - at Brecht's old theatre, the Berliner Ensemble. After just a few songs, I knew that this music expressed exactly my own current state of being. It eclipsed all the music I had heard up to that moment. But how could it be that my sensibility was aligned so closely with that of four male musicians from the West? And it wasn't just the music that struck me but the energy the band generated, the freshness and intensity of their performance and their stage presence. What was this music, I wondered, that so easily crossed borders of gender, culture and society – this stranger that seemed so familiar?

After some shock recovery – and, yes, there were tears - I decided to get to the bottom of it; to understand the impact this music had had on me, and others around me. So I contacted the musicians, to find out more about them, about their cultural context, and what their music was made of.

When I first saw Cassiber in 1983, they had only been playing together for half a year. Three musicians from Frankfurt/ Main - Christoph Anders, Alfred Harth and Heiner Goebbels, and one from England - Chris Cutler. All four were engaged in left-field activities: Christoph, Alfred and Heiner were associated with the Frankfurt Sponti scene and Chris with Rock in Opposition . Perhaps this might account for the intensity I experienced in concert; an intensity that sprang from an active engagement in resistance, and an oppositional attitude toward commercial Western culture and the Anglo-American mainstream-music it spun. Their particular anti-establishment position manifested itself in a desire to find alternatives, a music guided by an intention “to produce spaces for imagination against the imperialism of the occupation of imagination, and the mortification of imagination, through the prefabricated clichés and standards of the media” . These words, quoted by Heiner Goebbels from East Germany's acclaimed playwright Heiner Müller in 1983, reveal a commonality between the artistic oppositions in both East and West – a determination to open up mental spaces and sensibilities in their respective intellectually suffocating “states of order” (Ordnungsstaaten) . The oppositional tenor of Cassiber's music appealed strongly to its Eastern audience, and facilitated our engagement, since we had plenty of opposition smouldering in us too, glasnost being one of our main concerns.

In the Arts, openness assumed new forms in the postmodern 1980s. And for Cassiber openness seemed incompatible with submission to a single unified style. Rather the group made use of the musical differences each musician brought to its work: Alfred's considerable improvising experience; Heiner's passion for Hans Eisler, Classical Music and Rock; Christoph's New Wave and Punk intensity and Chris's radical Avantgarde-Rock aesthetic. So Cassiber developed a musical practice that allowed these different voices to fuse into a hybrid style, and would make the group's continuing aesthetic evolution possible. Of course, for such differences to remain productive over many years, a fair amount of tolerance is required, as well as a mutual respect for each other's differing skills. This is not easy to achieve, especially in a group of highly distinctive personalities.

In order to explore differences, music could not be “slick and complete” , but needed always to yield something new so that “we could constantly surprise ourselves” . Cassiber pursued this goal

through an aesthetic of inclusivity, hybridity and fragmentation. Songs like ... in einer Minute highlight this approach. Here we find excerpts from Schubert's String Quintet in C major (op. posth. 163, 1828) and Schönberg's A Survivor From Warsaw (op. 46, 1947) alongside raw noise collages; a saxophone phrase from Albert Ayler's Ghosts next to Brecht and Eisler's And I Shall Never See Again; chains smashing against metal sheets; the din of grinding buzz saws, pounding steam hammers and fragments of both live and recorded text. All this was held together with a hefty dose of improvisation – a technique characteristic of the group in its first incarnation as a quartet. The band assembled musical fragments, sounds and noises in an intuitive, flexible way, eschewing one-dimensional interpretations and leaving listeners space in which to develop their own associations. Such perceptive openness lets the listener in and, almost certainly, accounts for the fact that I was able to hear it as MY music.

At concerts, a playful musicianship and enjoyment radiated from the stage, which never failed to engage; certainly after many years it continued to fascinate me. Here was Cassiber's first line of contact, allowing the band to cross the boundaries between high- and low-brow audiences: Christoph's angular punk movements and fierce shouting; Alfred's unsurpassed emotional expressivity; Heiner's enigmatic, rock'n'roll keyboard assaults and Chris's elegant lightness, shifting seamlessly between free-style noise and controlled rock rhythms.

Much of what Cassiber did on stage was dramatic, even theatrical ("It's all theatre!") . And this is where Christoph played a central role. His powerful and expressive voice which, with a single word, could bring tears to your eyes or make your heart jump - combined with a cool demeanour influenced by '80's New Wave dance moves – was perfect for projecting that mixture of intensity, despair, hope, longing and gentleness that summed up the sensibility of the group.

No matter how grave the topics tackled in their songs (dictatorship, starvation, fascism, capitalism), Cassiber never seem tempted to indoctrinate or make didactic statements. Instead they worked with bizarre associative collisions, contradictory connotations and discordant messages. Coming from the left, they never shied away from difficult political and cultural issues; however they did approach them in unorthodox ways - using documentary fragments without revealing their contexts or sources, or repeating single words or phrases over and over again, in the manner of the Ingenious Dilettantes, inviting listeners to draw their own meanings. Text, music, samples, delivery and context often pulled in different directions, causing confusion and opening associative fields through which listeners could roam. Songs such as I was old when I was young exemplify this perfectly. And although they adamantly refused to speak for political movements - "Keine Stellvertreterhaltung, bitte!" , they constantly used their well-known political orientations as a backdrop against which to pitch a piece: for instance when, in the middle of a concert, Christoph read a text by the leader of the German Neo-fascists, giving no indication of its origin or voicing an opinion; or when two neutral words "gut – wenschon", through repetition and the use of a documentary voice-recording, begin slowly to reveal a disturbing meaning. In fact, nothing the band did could be taken at face value; everything was ambiguous and constantly challenged. Even when, at the end of a concert, Heiner broke emphatically into At last I am free, it was impossible to embrace this happy ending. In 1985, after two years of touring and the release of two albums, Alfred left. Without its improvising centre, Cassiber's aesthetic inevitably changed. "We did not improvise from nothing or develop pieces from improvisation anymore" . Constructed around Chris's - and occasionally other authors' - texts, the compositions grew tighter and were more carefully pre-arranged. Openness and fragmentation, however, still remained central to their practice, now augmented and realised through the added flexibility of two state-of-the-art Mirage samplers - acquired in February 1985. One replaced Christoph's analogue cassette archive, while the other now allowed Heiner too to work with pre-fabricated fragments. Cassiber's seven years as a trio (1985-92) and their last two albums (Perfect Worlds, 1986 & A Face we all know, 1989) were deeply marked by this new technology.

True to their communicative intent, the group continued to tour across Europe, Russia, North America, Canada and Japan - every now and then returning to East Germany, where their connections gradually grew stronger. Heiner and Chris developed close relationships with the two academics who had first introduced them into the country: Günter Mayer and Peter Wicke. Heiner

began to work with Heiner Müller, and Chris became my Western contact during the years I was curating and organising the concert series Music & Politics (1984-88) – a series that combined experimental musics from various genres in a single event. Over these five years, a number of alternative Western groups and artists - Duck and Cover , Music for Films , Dagmar Krause , Grubenklang Orchestra and Kalahari Surfers , as well as Cassiber - appeared on the same bill as experimental ensembles and composers from the East, who presented Contemporary music, electroacoustic and acousmatic compositions or Performance pieces. It was at one of these concerts that Cassiber met the East German composer Georg Katzer, who arranged for the group to record their fourth album A Face We All Know at the studio of the Academy of Art, in the heart of East Berlin – the first time, I am sure, that an album had been recorded by a Western Rock band in an East German state studio. The album's topic – the ramblings of a beleaguered and deranged dictator - was apt, even prophetic, at a time of growing social and political upheaval in the East Block. The short eccentric film footage in this box – the work of three East Berlin fans – reflects this bizarre situation.

By now, Cassiber was well known by both alternative-minded musicians and audiences in East Germany, and they flocked from all over the country to attend the annual Music & Politics events, leading eventually to the series being placed under a media ban. Despite this, the group's unconventional musical style influenced a number of alternative East German over- and underground bands, notably Der Expander des Fortschritts . In the midst of this growing social turmoil, the time was ripe for more unprecedented action, so we embarked on another adventure: organising a six concert tour for Cassiber across East Germany, just days before the wall came down (13-22 October 1989). The atmosphere at these concerts was explosive and had a truly empowering effect on us.

For me, Cassiber will always be linked to these exciting times, this short period of hope, in which alternative social change actually seemed possible. It gave me the liberating experience of discovering a different understanding of music - and of art in general: my personal gateway into a new aesthetics.