

The Wire

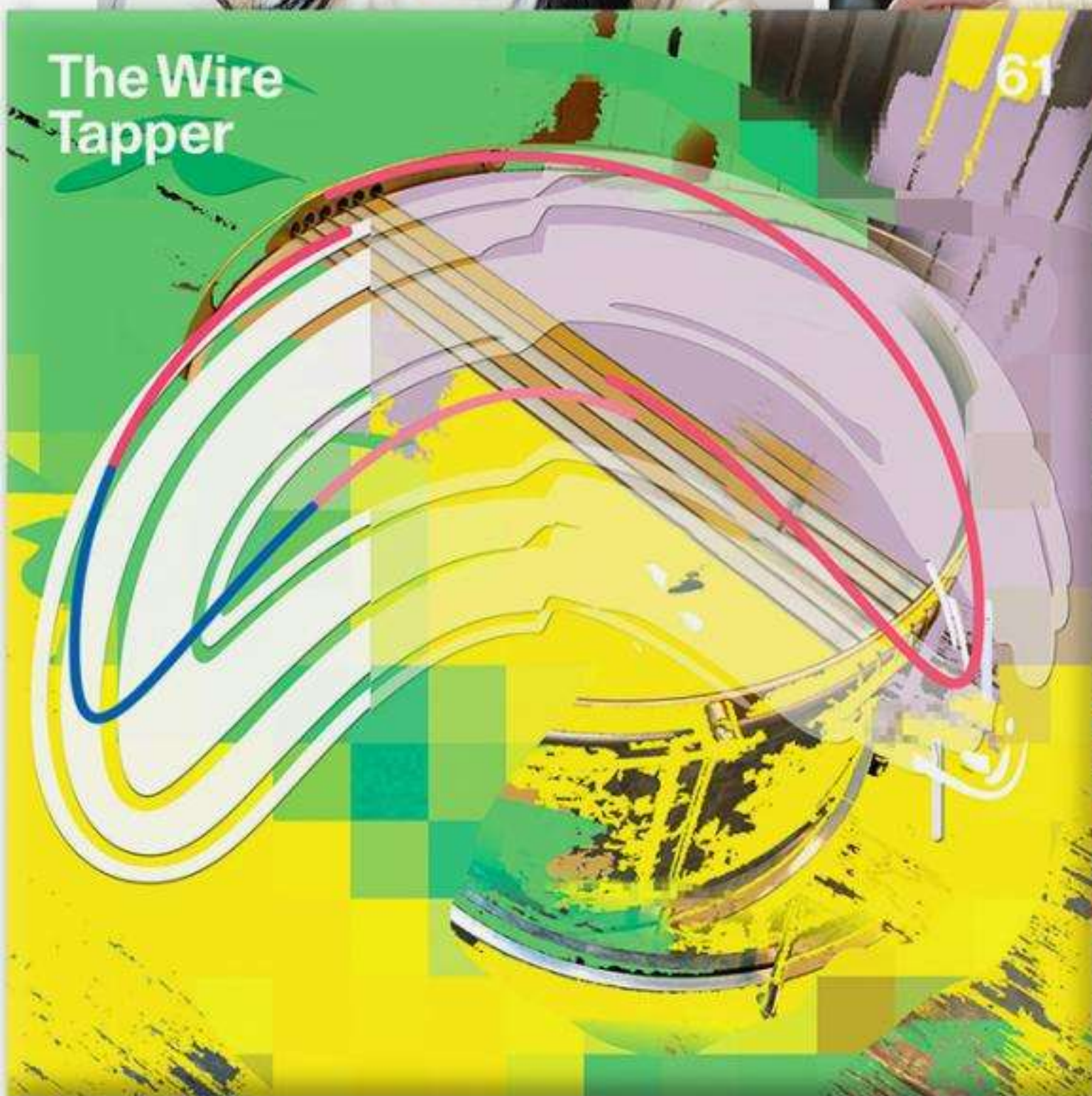
The Wire 470 April 2023

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Invisible Jukebox: Tatsuya Yoshida

Each month we play an artist or group a series of records which they are asked to comment on - with no prior knowledge of what they are about to hear

Tested by James Hadfield
Photography by Go Itami



Tatsuya Yoshida has been a crucial figure in the Japanese rock underground since the 1980s. Born in 1961, he grew up in Iwate Prefecture in northeastern Japan, where he started out playing drums in his high school's brass band and nurtured an abiding love for progressive rock. After moving to Tokyo to attend design college, he fell in with the live music scene, playing in punk and alternative acts including Phaidia and YBO2.

In 1985, he formed Ruins, a bass-drums duo whose stripped-back format belied the maximalist assault of their music, defined by Yoshida's dizzyingly complex drumming and operatic vocals. They caught the attention of John Zorn, who tapped Yoshida to play in multiple projects and later released several Ruins albums on his Tzadik label, some including guitarist Derek Bailey as Derek & The Ruins.

By then, Ruins were just one of the many units Yoshida was involved in, ranging from psych rock power trios Mainliner and Musica Transonic to a cappella vocal group Zubi Zuva. Yoshida's

obsession with Magma, already audible in Ruins, reached its fullest expression with Koenjihyakkei, a zeuhl ensemble named after the Tokyo neighbourhood where he has lived since the 80s. A tireless collaborator, he has worked frequently with Keiji Haino, Makoto Kawabata, Natsuki Kido, Mitsuru Nasuno and Seiichi Yamamoto, among others.

Yoshida has been fiercely self-sufficient throughout his career, releasing much of his music on his Magaibutsu label. After going through four different bassists with Ruins, he continued as a solo project, Ruins Alone, though in recent years he has also reconvened with old bandmate Ryuichi Masuda, as well as performing with saxophonist Ryoko Ono as Sax Ruins. Other current projects include longrunning avant prog band Korekyojinn and an improvising duo with keyboardist Risa Takeda. Koenjihyakkei's third album *Nivraym* was recently released in a newly remastered and reworked edition by Skin Graft.

The Jukebox took place in Koenji, Tokyo.

Zamla Mammaz Manna "Smedjan"

From *Famijlesprickor* (Impulse!) 1980

TY Ah, right. This is Zamla. Zamla Mammaz Manna [aka Samla Mammaz Manna].

JH **When did you first hear them?**

TY I think I must have been about 20 at the time. I started listening to prog rock when I was around junior high school age, but I was out in the countryside – Iwate – so there wasn't as much information available as there is here [in Tokyo]. So it was things like Yes, King Crimson, Camel, Genesis and Gentle Giant. I discovered the European bands like Magma and PFM after I graduated high school and came to Tokyo. It took me a little longer to get on to groups like this. They had quite an impact on me: it was different from the prog coming out of the UK and France.

JH **Where do you think that difference came from? The Swedish folk influence?**

TY That's right. It feels like they absorbed things like folk music and then put their own spin on it.

JH **And you also ended up becoming a member of the reunited Samla Mammaz Manna in the early 2000s, right?**

TY I did! We did a few tours in Japan and also played in North America and Europe a bunch of times. On the whole, we didn't play any new songs: it was material from the past, mixed with improvisation. I was using a sampler at the time, so I'd drop in some Japanese mood kayō [mood music], *Tensai Bakabon*... it's a manga by Fujio Akatsuka, and an anime. I sampled the theme tune from *Tensai Bakabon*, and I'd play it in the middle of an improvisation.

JH **I played this track because there's a strong element of humour in Zamla's music...**

TY Yes, definitely.

JH **... that's also something that comes through in your own.**

TY Yeah, that's been part of what I do since way back. I'd get a kick out of doing something slightly ridiculous in the middle of a really heavy song. It's something that [Zamla] and I have in common.

Maureen Tucker "Bo Diddley"

From *Playin' Possum* (Trash) 1982

TY [After about 30 seconds] Are there any vocals in this?

JH **Do you have an idea about the era?**

TY It feels like something from the 1970s. I might have heard this before, but I'm not sure what it is. Captain Beefheart? Who is it?

JH **It's Maureen Tucker, from The Velvet Underground. This is her 1982 solo album...**

TY Oh, Maureen Tucker. I don't know this at all. To be honest, The Velvet Underground's kind of music doesn't do much for me.

JH **I guess it's very minimal and repetitive. Is that why it doesn't grab you?**

TY Right. That's also why I don't have much interest in krautrock. I can understand the appeal, but I'd rather play – and listen to – music that has a sense of progression.

JH **Her drumming is the polar opposite to your own style, which is very complex and tight. Did you always play like that?**

TY Well... [long pause] the way I play now is still quite similar. Over the years, it feels like I've become increasingly precise and sensitive, rather than just relying on power. When I started playing with jazz musicians, I became more conscious about volume control, so that broadened my approach. But I've been using a lot of toms and playing in irregular time signatures since way back.

JH **Did that come from listening to prog?**

TY Right, right, right. I was accumulating all these complex metres before I started writing my own material, so when I did, [the songs] naturally came out in 7/5 or 7/8. They came as naturally to me as writing in 4/4.

JH **So they're called irregular time signatures, but to you they're just regular?**

TY As far as I'm concerned, that's what a straight rhythm is.

Moraz-Bruford "Any Suggestions?"

From *Music For Piano And Drums* (Editions EG) 1983

TY There's a hint of classical in the phrasing, which makes me think the players aren't Japanese. But it isn't really jazz, either.

JH **It's from 1983. Both musicians played in a well-known 1970s band – not at the same time!**

TY Oh, are these prog people? It's not Bill Bruford, is it? Bill Bruford and... OK, I don't know who the keyboard player is.

JH **It's Patrick Moraz. You were talking about how your playing changed when you started performing with jazz musicians. How did that come about?**

TY I think I played with Poo-Sun first... that's

[pianist] Masabumi Kikuchi.

JH **Oh, this was Slash Trio?**

TY Yes. The bassist, Masaaki Kikuchi, was [Masabumi Kikuchi's] nephew. He was really into my stuff, including Ruins, and was playing electric bass in that style. He played some Ruins to Masabumi and encouraged him to form a trio together, which is how it got started. I think Masabumi was around 60 at the time, and he was eager to try something different. I'd play a phrase or one of my own pieces – really tight, in a complex time signature – but whatever I did, he'd come back with something that swung. That's what made it interesting.

JH **Do you see a big distinction between jazz and rock?**

TY For me, they aren't so far apart. They're like individual ideas that I might incorporate into a piece when I'm writing music. The thing I don't like about jazz is the format: there's a theme, solos, then back to the theme. Then when you watch a jazz gig, and someone will take a break after playing a solo... [laughs] I hate that! I enjoy it more when everyone is engaged, and the music keeps progressing.

JH **Did you listen to much jazz in the past?**

TY I didn't then, and I don't now.

JH **So if I was to ask your favourite jazz drummer, you wouldn't have a response?**

TY There isn't anyone. With rock drummers, too, it's not the drumming that interests me: I'm more drawn to the music. I'm not a drum geek. I'm more interested in the pieces, so I like drummers who also write their own material.

JH **When you're in a duo with a keyboardist, does it take you to different places than playing with a bassist or sax player?**

TY It does, but it's not so much about the differences between instruments, it's about the performer. I've been playing in quite a few duos recently, but with each person it's completely different. Doing a duo with saxophone is fun, but it's hard to sustain for a long time. Keyboardists have both the right and left hand, so they're able to cover more ground. As a duo, it's easy for us to switch things up, so even though there are only two of us, we can play a couple of sets without running out of steam.

Inuhiko

"Tirititi"

From *Sake Ga Aru Nara Sake Motte Koi* (Enban) 2011

TY Jon [aka Jon The Dog]?

JH **That's right.**

TY Inuhiko?

JH Exactly, **Jon The Dog** aka **Shoko Uehara**, alongside **Gauze** drummer **Hiko**.

TY Did they make a record? Oh, of course they did...

JH **It's not a great recording.**

TY I don't know... as far as Jon's recordings go, I'd say this sounds pretty clean!

JH **They made a few albums. I saw them live at the time, and it was quite something.**

TY I'm surprised to hear [drummer] Hiko playing so straight! I thought it was much scrappier when they did it live! I guess it depends on the song.

JH **What's it like to play with her?**

TY It's a little different. Even with a song like this, I'll take a slightly different approach: doing various kinds of tom fills and using the cymbals more, rather than eighth note beats. I've also been doing a duo recently with Jon where she's performing without the [dog] costume, as Shoko Uehara. It's improvised, and she's doing an organ-style sound on a Casiotone [keyboard], but it's more... she calls it 'lo-fi scum punk improvisation'. That's fun. She doesn't sing like this - it's more like shouting.

JH **I think 'scum' is only used as a genre name in Japan. I guess it gets referred to as noise rock sometimes...**

TY So it's not as widely used as lo-fi?

JH **I think scum falls within the lo-fi bracket.**

TY Oh, I see!

JH **When you're playing with somebody whose music is as different from your own as Jon's, does it require a big shift in approach?**

TY I'm not so sure about that. I'll respond using whatever's in my vocabulary, and there's a bit of scum in there, too. I was part of the same scene as people like eYe [aka Yamataka Eye] during the 80s, doing various different projects, so I can have fun playing in that kind of scum style. If I'm doing it myself, I like to inject a slightly more technical element into it... though I guess it isn't scum anymore then.

JH **Technical scum! You're a genre unto yourself. Obviously Hiko is the ultimate in hardcore drummers, but Ruins have often been described as mixing prog with hardcore.**

TY Yeah, people have written that. I don't listen to hardcore at all... because I was into prog. But I really liked the energetic power of punk and hardcore bands, so I tried to incorporate that with prog structures.

Naked City

"Perfume Of A Critic's Burning Flesh"

From *Torture Garden* (Shimmy Disc) 1990

TY Naked City with eYe, right? Is this live?

JH **Yes, this is *Torture Garden*.**

TY Oh, *Torture Garden*? I think I played on this.

JH **No, it's Naked City's *Torture Garden*...**

TY We did a Japanese version of this song, in a unit called *Torture Garden*.

JH **Right. This has a lot of the energy you talk about. Very intense - too much to take in all at once - which can also be true of Ruins. Where do you draw the line? When is it too much?**

TY There's no such thing as too much. I feel like I need to do even more... not with a piece like this, but in my own music.

JH **Are you constantly pushing the limits?**

TY That's right... Sometimes I can't keep up!

JH **John Zorn used to live in this area, right?**

TY Yeah, he had an apartment on the south side of Koenji. I guess this was in the mid-80s, maybe the first half of the decade? He came to Japan and was buying up lots of records by Japanese indie bands, as well as old kayōkyoku and stuff, which is how he first heard Ruins. The first thing we did together was [Zorn's Ornette Coleman project] *Spy Vs Spy*. I got invited to play in a Japan version of that group.

JH **Tzadik released various Japanese underground artists in the 90s, which was part of a wider surge of overseas interest. Was Zorn a pivotal figure in all that?**

TY It was thanks to John Zorn. He put a lot of music out there, and he made arrangements for people's travel expenses when they went to New York. He really contributed a lot.

JH **So did he lose interest in Japan?**

TY Nowadays, he's a bit... yeah, you could say that. I think Japan's gone downhill. But I'm talking about things other than music.

JH **More on a societal level?**

TY Something like that.

JH **There was such an outpouring of adventurous music from Japan during the 80s and 90s. What was driving it?**

TY Why was that? It was that kind of period. Prog had finished - in a manner of speaking - and new wave was over, so it was like we felt we had to come up with something fresh. But I wasn't conscious of it at the time. There was a lot of interesting music coming out of the underground in other places too. It wasn't just Japan - I think there was a mutual influence.

JH **Yeah, I've heard about all the cassette trading that went on.**

TY Also, it felt like barriers between genres gradually came down during the latter half of the 80s. You started to get people synthesising different genres together - prog, jazz, punk - and turning them into something else.

JH **Naked City seemed to stick it all in a blender.**

TY Right. John wasn't really a hardcore guy. He liked the music, but it wasn't part of his make-up, so he'd get eYe to take care of that side of things.

Eli Keszler

"Simple Act Of Inverting The Episode"

From *Stadium* (Shelter Press) 2018

JH **[After a few minutes] Any thoughts?**

TY I've no idea. It feels recent.

JH **This is New York based artist Eli Keszler. He plays with various electronic artists, but this is a solo recording.**

TY Oh, so it's using overdubs?

JH **He plays kit, but with electronics.**

Recently, he's been using an interface called Sensory Percussion, which involves attaching sensors to the drum heads. You've supplemented your kit with electronics for a long time, right?

TY I use electronic drum-type stuff quite a lot, but I don't want to get deeply into using sensors or the like. It's a bit of a hassle.

JH **I heard you don't have a car - is that why you'd rather not add more to your set-up?**

TY There's that too. It's tough hauling things around! I basically use whatever drum kit they have at the venue, and it's a pain to have a lot of other gear. I used to carry around a couple of ADAT recorders and a mixer on my bicycle when I wanted to record. Carrying two of them was hard work. It was easier when I was just using a cassette eight-track or four-track.

JH **More drummers are taking this kind of electronically augmented approach nowadays.**

TY It's because the technology has become so much more compact. I'd like to do a bit more with electronics myself - I really want to try doing improvisation where it's just me and a computer, where the sequences etc change by themselves. Once it gets a little easier to do!

Keiji Haino & Charles Hayward

"Track 5"

From *A Loss Permitted To Open Its Eyes For But Three Hours And There Glimpsed Finally In Focus A Mystery That Begs Earnestly, "Ask Me Nothing" Now, Once More The Problem Is Yours Alone* (33-33) 2019

TY **[After a few minutes] I don't recognise this. Is it someone I know? [High-pitched vocal enters] Is that Haino?**

JH **That's right.**



Jon The Dog

Former Cows/Melvins bassist Kevin Rutmanis presents two new albums of post-pigfuck

By James Gormley

Dunn With Rutmanis
Crackpot Whorehead

Rock Is Hell DL/LP

hepa.Titus

unEat

Rock Is Hell DL/LP

Minneapolis, Minnesota's Cows might have been the quintessential Amphetamine Reptile band. Possibly not the feted Chicago label's bestsellers, but their fused surrealism and surliness was often the very cut of the label's jib. In short, imagine comparably gnarly Chicago imprint Touch & Go eyeballing you in a dive bar at the end of a day that saw them dumped before lunchtime and fired after.

That gives them a special status in the history of the idiom known in polite company as noise rock. Veteran critic Robert Christgau's more colourful epithet, pigfuck, coined in a disparaging Sonic Youth review, was worn lightly with a smirk by some borderline respectables. But the unruly AmRep cohort, Cows included, were perverse enough that they could have been buried in it.

Bassist Kevin Rutmanis has been the most visible former member since Cows split in 1998, starting a lengthy tenure in Melvins shortly thereafter. He would serve a shorter stint with Tomahawk, a supergroup of sorts convened by Mike Patton during a busy decade between Faith No More's split and reunion. Since 2011 Rutmanis's main project, alongside guitarist/vocalist Sterling Riley and drummer Paul Christensen, has been Los Angeles based trio hepa.Titus. Their latest album on Austrian label Rock Is Hell is titled *unEat*, presumably referring to the message board vernacular that bypasses content moderation; see the use of unalive for context. With that allusion in mind *unEat* isn't as abject an experience as you might expect. It's fucked and fried, but dental records are not needed to identify it as psychedelic art-damaged punk with the demeanour of a West Coast *Locust Abortion Technician*. Album highlights include a nauseating sludge cascade accompanied by Riley's baritone engine stall on "Dead Hands" and stroboscopic guitar beams fit to burn the pineal retina on "New Dizzies".

Crackpot Whorehead is Rutmanis's second collaborative album with Mr Bungle bassist Trevor Dunn (periodically supported on percussion by Lee Afentopolous of the Perth band Neomantra) following 2021's *Glen Krupa World's Great Drummer*. By comparison with *unEat*, it largely disregards rock



Cattle scarred: Kevin Rutmanis

protocol and structure, while sharing its arch humour and misshapen skew. Formally it's a more textural, spatial, cinematic and, at times, seemingly improvisatory release. Throughout a phantasmagoric assemblage of found sound, feral freeform noise and trilling strings we hear the kind of sinewy, bass-led chamber arrangements that track more closely to Dunn's output with the Tzadik label and its associated ensembles. He's been embedded in that network for decades and the affiliation with Tzadik label boss John Zorn – whose ties to the freak rock and quasi metal fringe are well known – dates back at least to Zorn's production of Mr Bungle's self-titled 1991 debut.

Other NYC Downtown references come to mind in unexpected ways. The menacing low key funk of "Mime Om" for example, could be Material at their most simmering. But, in line with their derangement, Dunn and Rutmanis's funk is something more like a fetor, a melting waxwork of funk, cack-handedly restored by Stephen Stapleton using some cracked doll's eyes, stolen dentures and rusty springs. ○

"Metal Pig" into an unstoppable four to the floor rollercoaster. Like a rave, it peaks in the middle, right as the stomping kicks of "Leadership Contest" and the wispy hi-hats and scythe-sharp synths of the Jungian "Masks & Archetypes" trigger euphoric release. While ultimately not as inventive as some of Child's earlier outings, *Crash Recoil* is nevertheless an urgent, kinetic techno record.

Antonio Poscic

Keith & Julie Tippett: Couple In Spirit
Sound On Stone

Discus CD/DL

A spontaneously composed suite in eight parts, Keith and Julie Tippett's *Couple In Spirit* (1987) is one of the most beguiling albums in either artist's catalogue. Using their multitracked voices, piano, harpsichord and

percussion, the duo created a deeply personal music. Ritualistic, elemental and beautiful, it sounds like little else. In 2019, the Tippetts made plans to record a follow-up, but the pandemic, followed by Keith's death in the summer of 2020, put a halt to that.

Last year, Julie Tippett returned to the project, using Keith's live solo piano recordings as the basis for new music. "It's Rain And Rain" is perhaps closest to the 1987 album in its dense thrum of tremolo piano chords and multitracked vocals, yet there's a greater emphasis on song, with Julie unveiling a gorgeous melody reminiscent of singer-songwriter Laura Nyro.

It's tempting to read the lyrics of "Riding" ("You carry me on a wind of song, save me when I fail") as a tribute to Keith, her bluesy alto moving over a galloping bass figure.

"Improvisation" finds Julie weaving golden threads of sound between Keith's resonant chords: the detuned twang of a zither, musical boxes, high vocalese. The appearance of Keith's voice towards the end stops you in your tracks. The title track nods to 1987's "The Choir And The Sunset Improvisers", with Julie's fervent chorus channelling Gaelic psalms, jazz opera and English folk.

As Discus boss Martin Archer writes in the sleevenotes, "Julie had to dig deep into her every reserve of strength and determination in order to make these recordings." *Sound On Stone* is an act of love comparable to Alice Coltrane's completion of tracks she and John had worked on together before his death. The results are profoundly moving, full of beauty and surprise.

Stewart Smith