***All Gates Open: The Story of Can***, Rob Young and Irmin Schmidt (2018), London: Faber, 572 pp., ISBN: 9780571311491, h/bk, £25.00

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Can may be part of what came to be called krautrock, rooted perhaps in the hippy movement, combining new electronic keyboards with rock and improvisation/wig outs, but they were a band regularly cited by many post-punk bands. John Lydon chose them alongside music from Peter Hammill, Nico. John Cale, Kevin Coyne, Tim Buckley and Lou Reed on his infamous Capital Radio programme back in 1977 (Bjork 2011) and let them influence early PIL albums, whilst Mark E. Smith regularly cited, quoted and appropriated them in the Fall. Primal Scream sampled them and Julian Cope wrote a whole book about them and their fellow musical explorers (1995).

There have been a couple of books about Can previously, and I have to admit that I have a soft spot for Pascal Bussy and Andy Hall's *The Can Book* (1989), but this is the first 'serious' attempt at telling the story of this influential band. The book is in two parts, starting with a band biography by Young, followed by a bit of a hotchpotch of collaged interviews, notebooks and comments from Schmidt.

Young sets the book up as a band biography, focusing on the whole not the individual strands, but of course this is an impossibility. Can were always a bunch of people working together who had individual back stories, characteristics, musical leanings and opinions. Therefore we get to hear about Holger Czukay's previous studies with Stockhausen, Jaki Liebezeit's career as a jazz drummer, how Irmin and Hildegard Schmidt met, and – of course – how Can came together.

Young's other framing device is a visit to the museum version of the Can studio. Although not complete, it has enough old consoles, soundproofing mattresses, instruments and vibe to recreate for Young his previous visit to the actual studio where the band played together for many years, improvising, grooving, practicing, recording and editing/collaging their music together. It is clear that Can were a band reliant on group chemistry, but also an astonishing amount of dedication and commitment to the process of playing together (the only other band that I can think of who worked in this way were This Heat at Cold Storage). This assembling and selecting of music is reflected in the way in which Schmidt compiles his half of the volume and the thematically collaged conversations are actually my favourite part of the book.

I say this because in the end I do not feel that I have learnt much from Young that I did not know, some details, yes, but not very interesting ones. Young struggles to write about the music itself in any meaningful way, and seems slightly afraid to critique the group of albums, including *Tago Mago* (1971), *Ege Bamyasi* (1972) and *Future Days* (1973), which are regarded as their masterpieces. There are questions to be asked about whether ten hours of selected music from several years playing is a sign of genius or not, about the notion of groove and precision, about – especially in retrospect – how strange or unusual this music actually was, even at the time. Perhaps the whole can of worms is opened by asking whether improvisation is of and for the moment, not something to be captured and recorded. (Although, of course, editing and collaging excerpts mean that a new piece is being composed). Young does not engage in this kind of interrogation, saving his critique for the later Can LPs that always receive bad press and he sometimes runs out of words to discuss Can's music.

Whilst the music is intriguing and occasionally radical, there is certainly a lineage between contemporary and experimental classical music (Karlheinz Stockhausen, György Ligeti and Luigi Nono spring to mind) and the drug-fuelled workouts of Amon Düül or the robotic synthesizer pieces produce by Kraftwerk, both of whom get mentioned in passing here. A wider musical context would have helped make the book more interesting, and also perhaps have given Young different ways to talk about the music.

Schmidt has his own ways of talking about, or getting others to talk about, the music that he made with Can. Friends, colleagues and associates such as Nick Kent, Wim Wenders, John Malkovich, Geoff Barrow, Bobby Gillespie, Mark E. Smith and Alex Empire get to converse on the page, if not in real life, to discuss the organic nature of a band caught up in themselves, their influences and processes and to reflect on Irmin’s question (mostly to himself it seems) ‘What does music mean in the twenty-first century, and what does it mean to be an artist today?’ (365). It has to be said that no-one has any coherent answers, but some of these collaged quotes are the best part of the book, although later notebook excerpts feel like filler, as does the end piece where Schmidt's neighbours reflect on what a great place Luberon is to live; it is a kind of demented *A Place in the Sun: Home or Away* script, or an advertorial in *French Living*.

I would like to be cynical, and suggest that perhaps Can liked (and some members might still like) weaving an aura of mystique around the band, but from the book it appears that they were simply of, and in, their time. They played and made music together, sharing studio space and time, rather than thinking about it very much. Holger Czukay, the member of Can who went on to make the music that most interests me, was clearly a driving force in producing their work. He was also the musician who most took on dance music and new technologies in both his solo work (recently gathered up as the *Cinema* box set [Czukay 2018]) and collaborated with the likes of Jah Wobble, The Edge from U2 and David Sylvian, and the ex-members of Can (Czukay et al. 1982; Wobble et al. 1983; Sylvian and Czukay 1988, 1989).

If you are not in the mood for Can's music they can sound annoyingly simplistic, locked into extended jams that go on far too long. If you are, you can start to hear the layers and minimalist variations, the textures of the work. Sometimes they sound like garage rock, to be placed alongside Loop's and Spaceman 3's retro-psychedelia, and at other times they out-weird early Pink Floyd, or could be classed as space cadets alongside Hawkwind. Like Faust, they appear to have gained an influential reputation without any reason for it (and I do not wish to dismiss either band's music). Young has missed a trick by not questioning and critiquing, preferring to buy into the critical- and self-mythologizing; Schmidt is still too close to the music, lacking distance, although the elusive and tangential conversation that he has curated comes surprisingly close to capturing what Can seemed to have been all about: the whole being greater than the parts.

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