

## OBITUARY

**Rupert Loydell**

Falmouth University

### **Mix-Up: Richard H. Kirk, 21 March 1956 – 21 September 2021**

Having been asked to write an obituary, I realised how little of Richard H Kirk's private life is known to us. What we have is the music along with associated interviews and reviews, none of which stray far beyond the worlds of music, electronics, and the writers, philosophers, artists and musicians whose influence was constantly acknowledged by Kirk and his bandmate Stephen Mallinder. From the beginning, collage and surrealism were important, something he mentioned as recently as 2020 in an interview with David Stubbs:

It's the idea of bringing completely disparate components together to create something new. It's the same with Burroughs and his cut-ups. I still think it's a very valid reference point. I know JG Ballard swore by it until his dying day. (Stubbs, 2020, 37)

Kirk goes on to talk further about how he creates his music: 'A lot of it is spontaneous. Sometimes I'm working on a track and I find myself saying "How the fuck did that happen? How did that come about?" It's very instinctive [...]' (Stubbs, 2020, 39) It is in the spirit of collage and working instinctively that I offer the following piece, my own response to Kirk's untimely death.

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'No story of the Sheffield music scene is complete without mention of Cabaret Voltaire, the post-punk outfit whose approach to electronic music was so feral it felt like you could hear it degrading in real time. The band formed in 1973, a time when one of their formative influences, Roxy Music, were in their Eno-inspired pomp. Fired up on a diet of J.G. Ballard, William S. Burroughs, and Brion Gysin, Cabaret Voltaire borrowed their name from a Zurich nightclub that was a gathering spot for pivotal figures in the Dada movement'. (Neyland, 2014) 'Like their Sheffield pals Martyn Ware and Ian Craig Marsh of Heaven 17, Mallinder and his cohort Richard Kirk sought to meld avant garde electronics with soul and funk influences; but what made them diverge significantly from the path that Heaven 17 ultimately took was their allegiance to Burroughsian cut-up technique. Their willingness to juxtapose content that was *not necessarily related* in order to create a "third mind" scenario that was richly evocative for its unplanned randomness.' (Post-Punk Monk, 2012) '[T]his was a band fascinated by the bridge between high and low culture, particularly in the desensitizing effect of TV news, which would spew out the topical

fare Cabaret Voltaire would often pick up on in their songs, beaming it out to an audience steadily anesthetized to shock.' (Neyland, 2014)

'Cabaret Voltaire was a seminal group. The Cabaret Voltaire inaugurated Dadaism in the back room of a Zurich tavern 1916, the owner agreeing to its use in order to increase the sale of beer, sausages and sandwiches. [...] Dadaism's anti-art stance sought to mirror the confusion wrought by the First World War's senseless slaughter. More than five decades later, Stephen Mallinder, Richard H. Kirk and Chris Watson formed Cabaret Voltaire in Sheffield. They were horrified and mesmerised by the power of the ever-expanding media, fascinated by the control it exercised and in response they developed strategies aimed at loosening its grip. [...] Cabaret Voltaire simultaneously enacted and interrogated the corruptive power of the media.' (unknown author, 2007?)

As part of Cabaret Voltaire, Richard H Kirk helped transform and subvert D.I.Y. electronics, home-taping and the independent music scene of the time. Although later released early demos – all flanged bass, primitive synthesizer drones and shouted vocals – sound like many other indie music bands of the time, and early gigs were apparently treated as sometimes violent performance provocations rather than concert presentations of music, the band's persistence in building their own studio, Western Works, and refining their use of collaged material, layering, multi-tracking and distortion soon produced fine albums such as *Red Mecca* (Cabaret Voltaire, 1981).

They also applied their skills in re-presenting found material to their videos. 'No one had more exciting videos than Cab Volt', '[t]he repetitive use of looped sequences in much of the material is visually analogous to the band's sonic modus operandi' (Post-Punk Monk, 2013): '[s]ynaesthetic combinations of sound and image accompanied music video from its beginnings, and it is hardly accidental that the groups [sic] Cabaret Voltaire, founded a video rather than a record label'. 'If the video work of Cabaret Voltaire was at the beginning lo fi and DIY, it soon developed a complex audiovisual language in which visual and audio cut up techniques operated in parallel and complementary ways. (Arnold, Cookney, et al, 2009: 144)

And then the band got funky, signed to Some Bizarre and Virgin (provoking accusations of selling out) and (ab)used state-of-the-art studios to produce albums such as *The Crackdown* (1983), now regarded as one of their best albums and a precursor to acid house and dance music. It is the mix of noise, rhythm, found sounds and songs that kept and keeps Cabaret Voltaire music so fresh-sounding. 'The most interesting music is always a hybrid of different influences and backgrounds'. (Mallinder, Goldstein, 1984) 'In the mix, creator and re-mixer are woven together in the syncretic space of the text of samples and other sonic material to create a seamless fabric of sound that in a strange way mirrors the modern macrocosm of cyberspace, where different voices and visions constantly collide and cross-fertilize one another. The linkages between memory, time, and place, are all externalized and made accessible to the listener'. '[T]his audio collage leaves its original elements far behind.' (Miller, 1996, 351-352)

The band would go on to sign with EMI, producing slicker, less relevant or memorable albums for many years, but Kirk was already busy releasing solo albums, a practice he would continue until his death. Some would be released under his own name but he also used a slew of different pseudonyms and band names, including

better known ones such as Al Jabr, Electronic Eye, Sandoz, and Sweet Exorcist. Many others were used for one-off singles, tracks or remix projects; all were firmly embedded in the worlds of electro, techno and house music.

In the mid 1990s, Mallinder, the other half of Cabaret Voltaire (Watson having departed back in 1981), moved to Australia, and Cabaret Voltaire was formally declared over. Although there were many releases of Cabaret Voltaire compilations, remix albums and archive live recordings, and reissues on Mute's The Grey Area label, only in 2009 did Kirk resurrect the band name, with himself as sole member. 2020 saw the release of *Shadow of Fear*, followed in 2021 by an EP, *Shadow of Funk*, and two albums, *Dekadrone* and *BN9Drone*. Although lacking the raw energy and surprise of Cabaret Voltaire's finest recordings, they nevertheless allowed Richard H. Kirk to leave behind a relevant, historical and contemporaneous musical legacy.

'I've always identified with the way the surrealists looked at things, with the world not being quite as it seems, which ties into experimentation with psychedelics. Once you've visited that place you never see the world in the same way.' (Kirk, 2017)

Thanks to Richard H. Kirk, neither will we.

#### NOTE

This obituary, samples, remixes and plunders material which is part of my forthcoming book chapter 'Chance Meeting: disembodied voices in the work of Nurse With Wound and Cabaret Voltaire'.

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