



Al Karpenter

If We Can't Dream, They Won't Sleep!!

Interview with Yan Jun

The album on ever never

<https://evernever-records.bandcamp.com/album/if-we-cant-dream-they-cant-sleep>

YJ - Yan Jun (interviewer)

AK - Al Karpenter (artist)

M - Mattin (producer)

If communism was haunting Europe like a ghost (Marx and Engels: "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism"), then Al Karpenter is now a ghost of rock 'n' roll haunting with his album "If We Can't Dream, They Can't Sleep!!" And like communism, this record is actually more ghost than solid, transforming into contemporary culture in many invisible and surreal ways.

Some would say communism is already dead. Or was ruined in the hands of dictatorships. But what if the magnificent spectacle was in fact a reflection of the passions of the masses, like the magnificent spectacles generated by rock 'n' roll? Undermining "all that is solid" and letting it melt away, Al Karpenter gives a lot of space to a kind of negative form in the music, using fragmentation, and contrasting shining high frequencies with cloud-dark low frequencies. The ghost drives through us like a murmur using our bodies like drum set made of flesh.

This is an album for the moment. You can't remember and retell its structure. There is no beauty that appears again from memory. There is no future promised. Just the moment of small noise and vast space, the moment in the river of life. It's not about Al Karpenter's singing and, or Seijiro Murayama's trance drumming overlapping with Lucio Capece's roaming saxophone, nor the heavy bowed bass by María Seco and

Mattin's auto-tune transformation... It's about reacting to the ruins of reality at every floating moment. (The idea that communism is a form of ghost is inspired by Oier Etxeberria's book "LaLana".) **YJ**

PART ONE



YJ: How did you know when to stop working on this record and allow it to be born? Are there things you considered doing but did not?

AK: Well, there were some recordings that were left off of the record, I have tried to use them for a forthcoming record "Musik From A Private Hell" which will come out with the French label Bruit Direct Disques.

M: To answer the first question: when it sounds wrong in the right way. Regarding the second question, the material can always be changed and adapted. I always wish that apps like Soundcloud could have a feature to copy and paste directly into the sound so anybody could take the material and do something straight away. In regard to this LP, it is already a record, a crystallization in a given time of a set of relations, certain materials, sounds and thoughts. And when it is out there, it becomes a message in a bottle, nobody knows where it will end up.

YJ: Chie Mukai's part is short. Is it all she recorded for this album? Or some materials were abandoned? How much materials or ideas were abandoned during the process?

AK: The recording of Chie Mukai was a proposal from Mattin, as the contributions for this record from Seijiro Murayama, Lucio Capece and Joxean Rivas. I don't know if her

recording was at “Larraskito” in Bilbao, or in another place, but her contribution and all of those recordings helped to make the album what it is in terms of how it sounds. I’m really glad for it. To your next question, two ideas we left behind was making a kind of “ASMR-type” of song, and making some more “noise-rock” textures.

M: With Chie Mukai we recorded a few tracks in my studio in Berlin, but we did not record while listening to Al Karpenter's record. The idea was always to put the record together as an assemblage. This means that not all the material was made for this record specifically. As we took material from many different places and we could have use sound already out there, we could even say that all the sounds available in the world that are not on the record were abandoned.

YJ: How much did you use le cadavre exquis-bira le vin-nouveau (exquisite corpse) method? Did you change any of the results of the pre-decided rules?

AK: Well, I think I don’t know that method, sorry... We started - Mattin, María Seco and me - recording this with a guitar, drum and bass in “Castle Rock” in 2018, and the next year we did it at “Bilbo Rock”, both in Bilbao. Of course, not everything from those recordings is in the final record.

M: There weren't any rules. I see potential in any material that Al produces. It is very liberating working with him, because we can be extremely playful between hierarchies, between good and bad sounds, or good and bad recordings. For example, Al records many of his vocals with his mobile phone and often there are background noises from other bands playing, so they become like field recordings. Following Marshall McLuhan, Al Karpenter demonstrates in practice that any medium can become part of the message.

YJ: There are many sudden changes or turns in the structure. What if there was a demonstration marching to your music but suddenly the atmosphere changed?

AK: The sudden changes in structure is something I have done since I began to record songs for this project and several past musical projects (Krpnters, Opus Glory Ignominia), and Mattin also loves to change structures. I think that’s a funny thing for both of us.

M: At the structural level, the sudden changes seem to be a reflection of our times. I don't think that the linearity of playing rock can match the complexity of today's reality,

especially if you take into account what the internet does to our perception and cognition. So even if Al and I come from a passion for rock, we try to shake it up, leave behind some of its problematic stereotypes and make music that can be in dialogue with contemporary reality rather than being an exercise in nostalgia.

YJ: "If We Can't Dream, They Can't Sleep", "Pow'r", and many parts of other songs, have strong bass sounds, or even pure sine-waves. What if people play it through smart phones and all of these frequencies are missing?

AK: Those abstract bass parts are from María's unique talent with the bass and the bow, I just love those parts. I really think that without them would not be the same album and not the same songs.

M: Many of those frequencies are computer generated. An example of the limitations of rock is the narrow frequency range that it uses but to be honest I think Al's attitude and message comes across with or without the frequencies. However in the near future when we all have neuro and aural prosthetics, there will be no problem to deal with these frequencies or with other much broader ones.

YJ: How much did the musicians know or not know about the plan, the lyrics or the method? Have they made any mistakes?

AK: When I start recording one album I don't know how will it end, or when... It's an adventure, and it ends when I finally have it in my hands, or in somebody else's hands. Fortunately, there were no mistakes here, all went right.

M: It depends of whom. For example, as Al already mentioned, María Seco was very important from the beginning of this record, while Chie did not listen to any of it until it was finished but she trusted us. Lucio listened to the tracks very attentively and played in response. The process varied a lot depending on the contributor and how much of the record was done.

YJ: Is the auto-tune effect of "Riot and Roll" Mattin's idea? How much did you paid for the pedal or plug-in? Do you mostly use freeware on this album?

AK: Yeah. It's an idea from Mattin. I don't know what systems he uses to do that... I just

know the way I do my work with my recordings, using a mobile, a sound recorder and a sound-mixing program, Audacity, which was recommended to me by Xedh.

M: The plug-in is actually called Auto-Talent and is a free software version of Auto-Tune. The entire record was made with free software: Ardour for editing, Supercollider for digital sounds, and LADSPA plugins effects, all used under Debian gnu/linux system. For the drum machine we used a free online version. I cannot remember the name but it sounded very trap-urban like. There are also some samples.

YJ: How many versions of "If We Can't dream, They Can't Sleep!!" exist? How many versions could you make? I found the Chinese melody (T) in Youtube version (<https://youtu.be/B1iSYACCKAg>) is missing in the album version.

AK: Well, I don't know anything about that video... All 7 songs from the album are played as acoustic versions with my acoustic guitar. And also with the electric one. Next thing is to play them with keyboard.

M: As far as I know there is only one, but AI is very good at reworking material and giving tracks another life in another context. With this specific track, there was a question of whether it should be one or two tracks, but AI decided that it should be one. I still wonder what would be the difference. Recently a friend suggested we make shorter tracks for critics and radio, but I thought that did not happen so much in the underground scene.

I would love to hear that song. Do you have a link Yan Jun?

YJ: Here is the link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZywj-U76YM>

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AK: I just watched the YouTube video... Well, the story is that I bought a megaphone that contained that melody, amazing! But it's not in the album, it just appears in the video-clip from that song.

M: It is crazy, this story of the megaphone, it says so much about globalization!

PART TWO



YJ: Is it true that Al Karpenter is not into technology and new modern gadgets? How do you fit your body (voice, hands on guitar, and your presence on stage) into today's media and machines? As Mattin mentioned, social media has changed our perception. I remember once Mattin was asked about computer coding,

M: In regards to coding, I remember a conversation that Miguel Prado and I had with Patricia Reed and Anil Bawa-Cavia

(<https://soundcloud.com/socialdiscipline/sd13-w-patricia-reed-anil-bawa-cavia-modes-of-access-to-complexity>) where they updated the communist expression "seize the means of production" to "seize the means of complexity." I think it is crucial that we understand the possibilities that technology can bring us. For us musicians, technology can allow for different uses of time, structure, frequency, and rhythm. I think it is very healthy to see the limitations of previous ways of music making from the perspective of today's possibilities. For many years there was the feeling that everything was already made, similar to what Simon Reynolds called "retromania." However lately I get the feeling that new things are appearing that make previous forms of music making outdated.

I think AI has no problem with technology at all, he uses everything he has at his disposal. I am thinking of a concert that we did together some years ago (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PoWZoaiXnc>) and AI was playing the guitar while taking pictures and videos of the audience but also using the camera as a slide for the guitar.

AK: Well, I still do the things as I ever did, with one guitar, and a voice, but not doing what everyone expects with them, but making new noises, playing without notes... That's still my aim.

YJ: Do you think Cornelius Cardew would agree with what you are doing in music? Specifically the Cardew who abandoned experimental techniques and turned to neo-romantic popular music. How could music today not serve imperialism without going into a narrow taste of so-called obscure art?

M: Anthony Iles, a very good friend of mine, said that Cardew playing neo-romantic realist music was the most avant-garde thing that he could do. Actually just before Cardew died, he was talking to AMM about playing together again. We are living now very different times. At that time many people thought that communism could be (however problematic that was). When Cardew became a member of the Communist Party of England in the early 70's, one could say that he turned political revolutionary but musical reactionary. This brings us to the question of form and content in regards to aesthetics (whether the type of party politics he engaged with was revolutionary has also been questioned, but that is a long debate for another

occasion). I remember an anecdote that Keith Rowe told me about the Scratch Orchestra (Cardew was a founding member). At that time the Scratch Orchestra was doing "pocket concerts," which basically means they were playing with whatever objects they had in their pockets. Around 1971 they were doing a tour in the UK and at some point they encountered a workers strike. The Scratch Orchestra really wanted to help them in their struggle but thought it would be completely meaningless to do it with their pocket concerts. For Keith Rowe the type of political popular music that they were doing afterwards with Cardew was like a spark or short lived fire in order to encourage workers in their struggles. While instead with AMM, Rowe thought of it as very slow burning fire that occurs through the years, decades.

The question is the function of different types of music in society, and this changes with the times. Rock certainly has no potential to subjectivize young people like it had in the 60's and 70's, when rock musicians thought they could really change the world, and they actually did. Today rock seems to be more like a language, a very gendered historical cultural expression with its tropes and cliches, which we cannot negate. In fact we should do the opposite; to work with these negative connotations in order to give it new potentialities, and I think this can only be through perversion. Music has something to say because it functions as a kind of social unconscious that is not yet fully worked out. Music expresses symptoms. Possibilities and potentialities collide in complex ways that are yet to be deciphered. Can we call this record obscure art? And if so, for how long, since never before there has been so much experimentation in mainstream music?

AK: Well, I didn't know Cardew... I watched some videos of him and his music, it's alright. I don't know if he could agree with our music but I think we would invite him to make some improvised music, yeah!

YJ: In 2021 would you still see capitalism as the most troubling issue for human society and our minds? Do you think the mess of this virus and the endless international political bargaining are evidence of democracy's failure?

AK: In fact, the pandemic and the renaissance of a "neo-fascism" era, is the final proposal of those ridiculous restrictions of mobility due to a "virus" ruled by governments and big corporations.

M: Democracy under capitalism is bound to fail, since capitalism is based in an unequal set of relations therefore it can never guaranty the necessary equality for democracy to

work. Having said that, I think democracy is an ideological illusion based upon the assumption that we can be free individuals with subjective agency, which I think produces what I call *social dissonance*, a structural form of cognitive dissonance which has to do with this contradictory belief in personal freedom and a systemic determination which constantly negates this freedom or makes it extremely narrow. We certainly don't seem to have the freedom to dictate our future beyond a capitalist horizon. That is why I think we need to be suspicious of concepts and terms that presuppose freedom or agency and look very precisely into both their fallacies and potentialities. Rock, improvisation and noise are cultural expressions which have been victims of presupposing such a type of freedom but increasingly we can see its limitations and we need to work with them.

YJ: About dream, what are the dreams that lead us to a better reality and what are the dreams that keep us far from it? Basically the mainstream talk is that we all should be dreaming of something far away instead of digging our own garbage.

M: If we want to change things we certainly need to dig into our own garbage, there is no other way around since we are in deep shit.

AK: The dream for me is to a world with more solidarity, but I think it's only possible avoiding capitalism.

YJ: Some of my old rocker friends say this album is "fancy post-modern shit" or "conceptual arty stuff". But when I post primitive tribal field recordings, they always give a "like." The sounds and structures of birds, wind, murmurings, and are sometimes similar to this album. Would you draw any connection between this "post music" and the wild and primitive part of nature?

M: This comment is interesting in relation to a distinction that has been drawn between first and second nature. First nature would be the natural form and second nature when commodity exchange appears which is humanly made. There is always a desire to achieve a relation to first nature, to look for something pure that is not tainted by commodity relations but this is only a form of mystification because we only perceive first nature from the perspective of second nature since we are living in capitalist relations. That is why I am ok with the kind of description that your friends are giving to you with regard to this LP. This record shows its artificiality, is fragmentary character. It

does not pretend to be pure. In fact it tries to show how purity -of rock and roll, or improvisation, or noise- can be manipulated both in formal and ideological ways. A proof of this is that we are talking about it right now.

AK: I think they could be right... It's always so easy to underrate what you can't understand. It's nothing new to me.

YJ: Some artists are angry, some are performing anger. Should a performer be their real self or perform their self? Or, if you say there is fundamentally no "self," then what should an artist do?

AK: I remember a phrase from John Lydon, "anger is an energy" (from "Rise" by PiL), with which I agree. I always need some kind of motivation or energy to get onto the stage and start to play.

M: I think as an artist one deals constantly with the contradiction of an overblown personification, a kind of performativity or campness that is both painful and playful. This makes you aware of the processes of mediation and theatricality in regard to the production of selfhood but you also realize that it can never be stable. A clear contradiction of our times is that while many people praise authenticity and integrity, they are doing it often through media that is everything but authentic. Perhaps with zines and very low-key publications, things are more down to earth but the way that they can be manipulated in the future is something that we don't know and it might be worth to take it into account.

YJ: Please ask me, your audience who you never met with this music in same room, a question.

AK: Well... I imagine a press conference, picking up my guitar and saying: -"What song of the album don't you want to hear... ? I'm gonna play that song, ha-ha-ha!!"-.

M: What kind of future do you want?

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