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Irmin Schmidt (Can) and Kumo (aka Jono Podmore): London, March 4, 2008

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Posted by Peter Guy on March 12, 2008 2:00 AM | [Permalink](#)



Anyone who is serious about music, seriously loves Can.

As *The Rough Guide to Rock* states: 'There is a significant lobby among rock fans - and probably an even stronger one among musicians - that Can were the greatest band ever.

Or as Julian Cope, puts it in his book *Krautrock sampler*, 'every one of Can's members is a hero, a Wizard and a True-star.'

So when Getintothis was given the chance to interview Can founder and keyboardist Irmin Schmidt about his new collaborative record, *Axolotl Eyes*, with producer Kumo it really was a moment we couldn't pass up... Despite having minutes to prepare - and without hearing the new record!

Getintothis: Hello, how are you, where are you today?

IS: I am at Jono's – Kumo's house in London...

Getintothis: I've got to be honest I am going into this blind, as I've yet to hear the record...

IS: You haven't heard it? Oh, what a pity.

Getintothis: Indeed. I suppose it gives you the perfect opportunity to tell me all about it...

IS: Well, tell you all about it, first of course its the music, which is quite different from our former record, *Masters of Confusion*, its really a studio record, it's recorded - whereas *Master of Confusion* was generated basically from live material, and it was very important that I was going back to the grand (piano); my first, old, good old, instrument - I started my career as a classical musician.

So the piano played a very important role on *Masters of Confusion*, whereas on *Axolotl Eyes* the piano is there still, but it doesn't dominate so much, it's not so important - its more really electronic sounds and there is also for the first time in our working together there are other musicians; a singer, trumpet and percussionist

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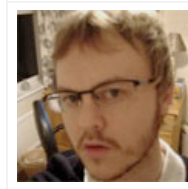
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Peter Guy discovered music late. Since then he's been making up for it. With a collection to rival a small record shop and a gig diary fit for any addled groupie, music is his religion. Sometimes he dreams of having Liam, Prince and Jimmy Page round for tea but most of the time he can be found writing and designing the Daily Post's sports pages. Getintothis is his guide to music, which he hopes you'll contribute to.

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involved.

Getintothis: So there's a more textured, layered, improvisational approach.

IS: Yes, everything - the trumpet is for example dead... not everything, but most of it, is improvised around existing material or with us together. With a few exceptions - like playing *Kick On The Floods* (**the first track on Axolotl Eyes**), the trumpeter plays a melody which I had initiated on the keyboards and we decided it sounded better on trumpet - but basically he really improvises on it.

The singer really is spontaneously actually saying to the tapes - the recording, the music which existed already - and he was singing to it - it was basically really spontaneously done.

Getintothis: Do you and Jono (**Podmore aka Kumo**) get together and paste the music together and build on layers.

IS: It's different again from the last record, this time, actually, he initiated the pieces by putting down rhythm tracks and electronic sounds which were the basis of the pieces and then we came together - and during the process of making the record I made a lot of other things, and I had to make a lot of other things - and we came from time to time together and Jono had worked a lot, whereas I had not much time for it as actually Jono wanted, so Jono had to go alone, and then finally of course we came together and I played piano and keyboards with him together and we worked together in the studio.

And the mixing of the record was something we did, not only together, but it was part of why some of the pieces we improvised on the board. We put all the tracks on the board and then did a kind of dub mixing, spontaneously mixing the piece, say three times, and then picked the best one and edited it together.

Getintothis: So there is a great emphasis on the spontaneous/improvisational approach.

IS: Yes, always.

Getintothis: And of course this approach goes way back to your **Can** days.

IS: Yes it does, working with electronics, there is a certain limit to spontaneity, because the manipulation of putting a rhythm together in the computer is a sort of process where you react to what you have done spontaneously, but basically it's a step by step composer's process.

But when there is something existing, like when Jono had put a basic rhythm track down, I just react to it - and play to it and don't think what would be the best melody, like on *Kick of the Floods*. I just play, and by playing a nice melody appears.

Getintothis: Are you surprised by the critical electronic renaissance in the last few years? A lot of the cross over in to the mainstream, electronica is the big critical success. Guitar bands seem on the wane...

IS: Yeah, that's normal... My own approach to electronics was always very cautious, very critical because I don't believe what many people do in an endless possibilities in electronics - electronics are limited like any other instrument.



Getintothis: Do you mean by way of tone, sound?...

IS: Yes. I think the exploration in electronics is existing (sic) - it is there - and now you play with existing instruments - like piano or violin - its not so much more the research on finding new sounds; I think the capacity in finding new sounds in electronics is limited and has been explored.

You can still find new sounds on say saxophone, and very personal ones, but basically the electronics are now and are an existing instrument.

And you can use for cheap, commercial, mainstream, advertising or pop songs and brilliantly wonderful music but it doesn't mean

you find new sounds. You find new wonderful sounds in existing sounds within yourself, and a new expression of what **you** want to say.

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Getintothis: So, you think it's down more to do with the creator, the personal, rather than the technology?

IS: Yes, take Blues singers - there is only so many patterns, melodically patterns or limited number of clichés, but it is there voice - the emotional richness, their expression is endless according to the person who is either an artist or isn't - if he is, he can use a very limited number of patterns and clichés and rules to express himself and that's all about using instruments too and using electronics come nearer to this point, than this kind of myth, that the possibility of finding new sounds is endless - *it isn't*.

Getintothis: Are you surprised that your back catalogue is constantly revised and increases with influence year upon year.

IS: Yes. I am very happy about that - what can I say, it's true... *laughs*

You know it is only surprising, say, in the last 50 years of rock and pop music that somebody lasts so long... But, for me, as a classical musician - part of me is a classical musician - part of me is a rock musician - I was brought up, and still listen to music which is 500 years old and it is perfectly natural to me to listen to music from the 14th, 15th, 16th, 18th, 19th century - so why shouldn't music which was created within the last 50 years last?

Getintothis: And I suppose the boundaries between classical and rock spheres have merged even more...

IS: Yes, but I have never recognised these boundaries, these limits between, because that's what my musical approach, that jazz, rock, and the new classical music are three different phenomena in the new, our culture, they are equally important.

All my music with **Can** and afterwards is dealing with all three at the same time and looking at this phenomenon again and again from different angles.

No matter if I play like on *Axolotl Eyes* with **Jono/Kumo** electronics or writing for a symphony orchestra that's always the same trying to bring all these aspects together.

Getintothis: Do you believe your ethos of existing in an 'anarchist community' is possible in today's music climate?

IS: I do it in a different way, I do it with Jono. I reckon the culture has changed and it is different - maybe it is harder... whatever... or different in our days which doesn't mean I feel more limited. I do what I want to do.

Getintothis: There seems to be a huge wealth of people doing things on their own with easy access to promote your own material, the ease at which you can consume and produce music seems to swamp people now...

IS: Eh, yes, well, yes, but I think it will come back to... Let me turn it like this - for over six thousand years, musicians were cultural specialists. There were a few ones in ever culture, some painted, some sculptured, some wrote, told stories and musicians are specialists and they performed, they learned to play an instrument and they learnt to play it better than anybody else and then performed to people who liked to listen to them because they could do something which nobody else could do.

The internet gives you more and more pop music and the internet gives the illusion that everybody is an artist - ***not everybody is an artist!***

There are better and less good ones, there are people who are born to be musicians because they are immense.

There are others who can draw from childhood who are incredible good - I would never dare to draw - I am incredibly bad at it - but I am a musician.

It comes back to the state where everybody can put something into the net *but not everybody will be able to go onstage and fascinate people and that's what it is going back to*.

There are those people who can fascinate and emotionally get the people - those are the specialists in culture and the rest will put their things into the net and sometimes someone will put something in the net and millions will buy it and the rest is just an exchange of democratisation.

The democratisation is wonderful - it is one thing, but the other is art - and art is not democratic. There are **BETTER ONES** - some people do something absolutely wonderful and those are the artists. It will come back to this - so I am not very pessimistic.

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Getintothis: Do you think we're more than ever spoon fed or dictated to what we listen to?

IS: That is a very good question, I know what you mean... That's a complex thing, something I don't have time; it's the structure and commercialisation... But maybe you should ask Jono... Unfortunately I have to go, many thanks! Bye! *rushes off*



phone passed onto Jono

JP: Hello! It's Jono here!

Getintothis: Ah, hi, I was just asking Irmin what your tour commitments were and do you have plans to come to Liverpool?

JP: We'd love to come to Liverpool, because I always stay with me mum in Liverpool!

Getintothis: Oh, you've family up here!?

JP: I'm from Liverpool – you should have Googled me! It's all over the Net that I'm a Scouser...

Getintothis: Haha, what part of Liverpool?

JP: Aintree, right by the racecourse! **YOUR** home! Apparently they have gigs up there – a friend of mine sent me their tour dates and they were playing the Old Roan – so it's becoming international renowned!

Getintothis: Obviously, it'd be great for Liverpool to see you both here, especially what with Can being such an influence on the City's musicians...

JP: I suppose so, but when I started working with Irmin, the only memory the band had about Liverpool was when he played the stadium with **Hawkwind** in '72 or whatever was the only time they had their gear nicked – sadly very stereotypical – so there is very possibly someone in Liverpool with **Mickey Karoli's** custom-built guitar with the ring modulator built in, unbelievable!



Getintothis: Oh, no, how stereotypical....So, how did you meet?

JP: Irmin wrote *Gormenghast*, and the whole concept was the music being played with an orchestra submerged in electronic and percussive stuff and connected to the contemporary dance music scene.

So he needed someone who could read the orchestral score and understand it – but then do all the programming and recording of the dance music, electronic side of it and I was basically the only one who could fucking do it. Because I have a background in classical music – which I completely ditched and went for real music ... I used to play in the

Merseyside Youth Orchestra and studied it

at degree level before working in studios and working with bands and touring all over Britain.

I was part of the music scene in Liverpool as a kid and recorded my first single at the

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Open Eye – or the Open Ear as it was known at the time – in the late 70s/early 80s, then studied classical music and did my degree down in London.

Getintothis: So you're based in London full-time?

JP: Well, based in London now, but lived in Germany - Cologne for seven years, my daughter was born in Cologne. And moved back here two years ago – but I've still got a job in Cologne – I'm a professor at the University of Music in Cologne.

Getintothis: Wow, hugely impressive!

JP: *laughs* Thank you very much - I like to be hugely impressive. Ironically, Cologne is twin-town with Liverpool, and Kyoto – another of my favourite cities... So yeah, I'm the Professor of the Practice of Popular Music.

Getintothis: Ah, you're just showing off now...

JP: *Laughs* and I am setting up an MA Course in production – so if there's any budding little Scouse producers who wish to feel the huge weight of my knowledge bearing down on them they better get their applications in *more laughing*

Getintothis: So, what's the influence of the record – where did you come up with the name, *Axolotl Eyes*?

JP: An axolotl is a Central American animal that lives in caves, in fresh water, and is a fascinating beast which if you take out of water – they're like a big newt with gills on the back of their head, and when you take them out of water they turn into salamanders. But they can reproduce and go through their whole life in axolotl stage. A friend of mine in Sheffield – **Peter Hope** – who I recorded my first record with in 85-86 – and he used to keep them – and early 2007 my wife and I, and friend Kate, were making a two-hour film, *Flies, Guys & Choirs*, as an accompaniment to the film which comes with the CD. Whilst making the film we filmed quite a lot of axolotls which became a theme running through the whole thing.

Interestingly enough, talking to the **Liverpool Daily Post**, the cover art work is done by another Scouser **Colin Taylor** - we went to school together at Old Hall in Maghull - he was the 'Idiot from Lydiate'!

We went to school together. He's always been a fine artist and graphic designer and used to teach at Central St Martin's College. I've used lots of Colin's work on album covers and he really loved the idea of the axolotl's.

Plus, he's really sick of the whole computer-orientated design - he refers to most of his contemporaries and indeed his own work - as 'computer jockeys'.

So he really went with the idea of making masks and body paint, and nudity and analogue photography which is one of the reasons why the imagery is so striking.

Getintothis: So what's next?

JP: Gigs. What we present now is so rich. The first album came together from our live shows and developed from that. And for the new album we've used the trumpet and voice as samples - but if we get bigger gigs it would be nice to bring in the other musicians.

We are offering different levels of shows depending on the venue - our last gig was on a boat on the River Rhine which was me with all my electronics and Irmin with his keyboard. And the next level up on that is Irmin with his grand piano and keyboard - then there's the next level with all the other musicians. But we can do really tiny gigs, we've done DJ sets, last year we did a really successful DJ set in Lille in France so it is ...

Getintothis: You should come down the Barfly or Masque, it's only right in Capital of Culture Year!

JP: Well, we're looking for gigs round April/May time but you have to bear in mind that we are a Europe-wide act so we concentrate as much as possible on Germany, France, Spain as we do on the UK. We've done a few gigs in London, but I'm itching to play the rest of Britain.

But regarding Liverpool - I think it's more about the people who live in Liverpool - not Scousers who live all over the world - if you want the entire Scouse Diaspora to play gigs in Liverpool the population would quadruple. It's amazing to me as effectively an ex-pat Scouser, that when you go into a bar, in say Kyoto, and you get *adopts thick Scouse accent* 'Eh, where da fuck are you from la?'

It's amazing that we are everywhere - especially from my generation. I left Liverpool in 83 and that generation of us where the money ran out and the population got

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in 80s and that generation of us where the money ran out and the population got squashed...

Getintothis: I thought they'd all moved to Skem..

JP: Well, yeah exactly - they're either in Skem, Camden or Bournemouth.

Getintothis: Bournemouth?

JP: Yeah, Scousers descended to Bournemouth to hire and sell deckchairs on the beach - it became a bit of a magnet - if you could get to Bournemouth you could get work across the south coast and there was a Scally community in Bournemouth. In that late 80s period in the South east and South west, being a Scouser was really like - you would go in people's homes and they would hide their valuables and it was a combination of reputation and that whole generation was in poverty and on the rob!

Getintothis: To be honest, when I went to my first Glastonbury I had a similar experience where the Scouser stereotype came to the fore and people were wary of the old school mentality...

JP: Haha *laughs for long time* Well, yeah it was a combination of poverty and there is a Scally tradition in Liverpool. The etymology of the word toe-rag derives from when ships were coming into Liverpool from the North African coast, and when seamen saw little, filthy kids nicking stuff off pallets they thought they were like towrigs (?) who were a North African tribe who used to send their kids down to the ships to scavenge and they started to call the kids in Liverpool toe-rags - so there's always been a tradition of filthy little kids nicking shit - which is what I'm training my daughter to do now!

Getintothis: What's influencing you at the minute..

JP: A friend of mine - **Martin Atkins** - who was the drummer in **PIL** and **Killing Joke** and he runs a record label in America called *Invisible Records* and I hooked up with him last week in Germany and he had with him stuff he recorded in Beijing; and it reminds me of stuff like **The Fall**, the spirit and it reminds of stuff driving people in the North West in the 80s. It doesn't sound like the **Bunnymen**...

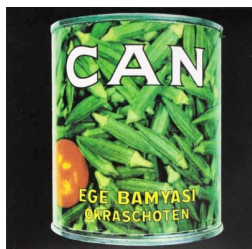
The album is called *Look Directly into the Sun*.... And a friend of mine came round the other night and we ended up getting really drunk and listened to the remixes of the **Aphex Twin**'s *Come To Daddy*... And I'm still a big fan of **Cornelius** - the live show is a completely different thing, its incredible and every track has a film for it and is precisely synchronised and its really emotional - it really gets to you... so it's Chinese, Japanese and a bit of fuckin **Aphex Twin**...

Getintothis: Right, I'm gonna have to crack on, great talking to you... Say thanks to Irmin..

JP: Oh, he's gone to talk to the BBC, they didn't want to talk to me - they wanted to talk about the **Can** background - IDIOTS!

Getintothis: Haha, I guess that's something you have to deal with a lot...

JP: Mmm, yes and no. Well, its something I'm not too bothered about as I co-ordinated and actually did the whole of the re-mastered **Can** records, so I am deeply involved in all that as well. So I know the material inside out.



Getintothis: So what's your favourite **Can** record?

JP: Well, I'll have to be really boring and say *Future Days* or *Tago Mago*.

Getintothis: *Future Days* - every time.

JP: Yeah, well the thing with *Future Days* is I don't like *Bel Air*...

Getintothis: Ahhhhhh, scandalous!

JP: I know - for me, the tracks on the first side are just so successful, complicated and so much to say - whereas *Bel Air* is just a floaty thing... Also with *Tago Mago* there's wonderful stuff and there's other stuff which doesn't work as well - I'd like to

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make my own compilation.

The other thing which gets overlooked, is that you avoid the later stuff and the LP *Can* - which if you listen to that album with the ears of when it was released you can hear all the music of the next five years - you can hear **Talking Heads**, **Eno**, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, in some ways that's possibly their most influential records - because the people that were inspired by that album were then producing **U2** - it had a massive effect on the mainstream that album.

Getintothis: I suppose it's pop too, and it didn't have the enigmatic, exoticness of **Damo Suzuki**..

JP: The thing about Damo though is that he's not enigmatic anymore...

Getintothis: Yeah! He's everywhere - my mate peed next to him at ATP!

JP: Yeah, if you go to a gig, he's there - and Damo is playing about 200 gigs a year!

Me: Yeah, we saw him at ATP with the **Mars Volta** which was pretty spectacular.

JP: Well, I can imagine - the **Mars Volta** are a great band. The thing with Damo is the story is so interesting - he is like an uncle to my wife - and he disappeared and became this Jehovah's witness and when we did the *Can Solo* projects tour we played in Hamberg one night and **Mickey Karoli** had put this night together and when we're half way though this old bloke in a jumper jumped on stage and it was Damo - and it was like what the fuck... and he was like normal, and over weight and then started out belting out *Mother Sky* - and I tried to talk to him after the show but he was like.... his head was somewhere else as he'd had to change his entire life and since then he's played like 200 gigs a year.

Getintothis: Well, he's played Liverpool several times in the last few years with a Liverpool band **Zucankan**... well worth checking out.

JP: Oh, ok, good stuff. I'll check this out...

Getintothis: Right, anyway, I'll defo have to shoot!

JP: No problem, nice one, speak to you later...

Axolotl Eyes is released by Mute Records on April 14 2008.

www.myspace.com/irminschmidtandkumo

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Herman Platz wrote...

nice work peter. lots of interesting stuff in there.

Most amusing was the fact that the only time Can had their gear nicked was in Liverpool. no respect for music in the 'pool...

and that one of jono's favourite albums is Future Days yet he doesn't like half of it...

and that irmin cut you off and then you did to poor jono...

Posted by: Herman Platz | March 12, 2008 4:08 PM

Pete wrote...

Glad you liked it Herman. Indeed sad indictment of our fair City. Not going to make excuses, however, I would say those stereotypes are changing - and all for the better.

Yes, gutted Irmin cut me off - those pesky types at the Beeb wanted to chat Can - no doubt relegating his fascinating new stuff to a mere footnote.

And having listened to the record in the interim since conducting this interview it is deserving of much study.

Yeah, poor Jono, I really could have chatted all day with him, total dude. But alas, sport work was calling.

Cheers for reading.

Posted by: Pete | March 13, 2008 2:44 AM

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chris orrell wrote...

great article pete.

when youve got a min checkout the Red Winter Kapital myspace out.

www.myspace.com/redwinterkapitalmusic

check out the track "for god sake hold on"

cheers
chris

Posted by: chris orrell | March 25, 2008 1:29 PM

Jono wrote...

nice one Pete
- but entomology is the study of insects - etymology is the study of the origins of words:0}
I'm off to check on me collection of crickets (which are kosher as it turns out)
I'll let you know about any gigs

Cheers

JONO

Posted by: Jono | March 28, 2008 9:39 PM

Pete wrote...

Agh, you got me... Consider it corrected!

And you better come to Liverpool now, you smart arse! ;)

Posted by: Pete | March 29, 2008 12:00 AM

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