



Gen Ken Montgomery

Drilling Holes In The Wall
RUSSIA MONOCHROME VISION MV17 CD
(2007)

A great compilation of work from the late 1980s and early 1990s by this superb New York creator, full of sound and music which shows a tremendous engagement with the physical processes of cassette tapes and synthesisers, and even a political engagement with the forces of suppression. The title track was recorded in January 1990, just after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Gen Ken paints a vivid picture of this significant event, and it sounds like he was right there in the thick of it when all of Berlin was celebrating with a wild party on New Year's Eve. A celebration of freedom like that would probably result in some memorable sounds, but it was the hammering and chiselling noises that inspired the core of this very percussive piece, and to realise it Ken worked with his trusty old Casio MS-10 keyboard modified by a friend to perform as a very crude synth. There's a lovely photo of this 'cranky' instrument, which was spray-painted by Ken to personalise it even further. Already this record is off to a good start.

Gen Ken visited his friend Conrad Schnitzler in West Berlin, intending to perform the composition 'Drilling Holes in the Wall' as a cassette concert, using four separate tapes played through 8 speakers. It's not quite clear if that ambitious idea (a clear homage to the cassette concert work of German maverick Schnitzler) ever came to fruition, but there was a performance back in NYC directly after Christmas 1989. Gen Ken released it himself on Generations Unlimited with a cover photograph showing a huge hole torn in the Berlin wall. While not made explicit, the clear subtext of this work is something about the power which electronic sound possesses to change the world, both physically and politically. If this notion leads you to expect 29 minutes of roaring cannon-blasting explosive noise from 'Drilling Holes in the Wall', guess again - it's a very complex and subtle piece of twisted analogue genius, achieving its effects largely through persistence and barbed, nagging phrases, and using the full range of effects available from the crude, modified Casio. White noise melds with strange semi-tuneful gloop, mechanical rhythms are crossed up with free-wheeling vertical and horizontal swoops of sound, and there's tremendous amounts of exciting cross-trafficking noise to listen to. The whole piece breathes a sort of implacable, destructive energy, yet is also totally liberating.

Part I of 'New Age Machines', from 1988, was originally released as the A-side of an LP called *Beyond My Ken* (Discos Esplendor Geometrico EGD 017). Given the extreme rarity of the original vinyl it's a boon to have access to this, another 8-track cassette concert, now made available along with its sister piece, 'New Age Machines Part 2', previously unreleased. Unlike the slow but inexorable force implicit in 'Drilling Holes', these pieces are introspective and extremely alien, exploring the possibilities of electronic music with a free and inquiring mind, undertaking a strange journey that could lead anywhere. The surface may appear crude and unpolished by today's standards of digital perfection, but that's what makes this music so important and exciting - full of a coarse capability that's undeniably human, and almost as physical as a gigantic minimal sculpture made of cast iron painted black. 'Montgomery is absolutely genuine,' states Dmitry's sleeve note full of praise for the great man, 'he has no training in traditional music or art. He was never a follower of any direction or school. Instead he founded his own school of off-beat DIY-electronics, driven by irresistible curiosity and ingenuous enthusiasm for sound experimentation and process-oriented performance'.

The performance aspect of Gen Ken's work is represented here by an 8-minute excerpt from his ongoing *Icebreaker* project, which we also heard in part on a *Staalplaat* release from 2001. It's not mentioned here, but all the noises here were originated by using an ice-making machine, one of many experiments involving the use of common domestic appliances

to make sound art. This re-mix excerpt is from 1991; the year after that, Gen Ken performed it as an octophonic sound installation in NYC (and released the full piece as a four-CD set, for those who have to hear everything). A bewildering piece of mechanical scraping and churning results; Ken's processes really 'open out' the small interior workings of the object, amplifying and magnifying them into an immersive effect.

Lastly we have 'Don't Bring Those Things', an excerpt from a live performance made in 1986 in the former German Democratic Republic. Its title brings us back to the political engagement mentioned earlier; every time Gen Ken tried to bring his Casio MS-10 into East Berlin, the authorities turned him away, the border guards exhibiting deep suspicion when they clapped their slitty eyes on his mechanical keyboard with its dangling wires and knobs, which to their suspicious minds probably resembled a surveillance device or a special radio set for communicating with foreign agents. What a belter this tracks is. With these six minutes of pounding, brooding electronics, Gen Ken tells the above story in his own words, channelling lots of emotion and apprehension into the performance, and realising a brilliant piece of edgy and terrifying music in the process. One of the three unreleased tracks on offer, 'Don't Bring Those Things' alone makes this CD an essential purchase. Through his rough-hewn crude electronic noise, Gen Ken has drilled holes in the walls of oppression, setting us free with his electronic imagination.

ED PINSENT 12/09/2009

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