

Fire in the Park



About the Film *Music by Günter "Baby" Sommer and Dietmar Diesner* By Bert Noglik

Jürgen Böttcher's camera circles over East Berlin and the Marx-Engels Forum. Böttcher orbits the history into which the GDR disappeared, which left not only monuments, but utopias, injuries and phantom pains, cause for thought and barbs as well. Böttcher relates the monument to the philosophical leaders of a world revolutionary movement—often turned to concrete, marble, bronze and cast iron—to a dynamic sound performance. "The struggle and unity of the resistance" as it was called in the little canon of the dialectic. And Karl Marx's response to stagnation and spontaneous changes: "One has to force these stagnant circumstances to dance by singing their own melody."

Did the GDR have its own sound and, if so, what remains of it? The chugging engines of the *Trabi*, the rockers' melodrama, the commissioned symphonic piece, the daily top hit or the song of the masses? Improvised music, which grew out of jazz and also partially from rock music, truly erupted in the GDR in the 1970s and 1980s, and it proved to be a sound event of authentic quality. This music could outlive the GDR because it reflected on a society in flux and it saw itself as not only a mirror, but also as action.

The question, if there is or was a specific GDR jazz, remains open. Surely, there were distinctive musical characteristics in GDR jazz caused by friction in the narrowness of the circumstances, conflict between self-assertion and paternalism, desire to communicate with international and free improvisation, and close contact with an audience of a similar unconventional state of mind. In the 1970s, musicians and their allies started to set up a network of organized events. Small clubs and big open-air festival events became meeting and gathering points for a scene with sub-cultural undertones. The little town of Peitz, near Cottbus, became a mecca for the GDR free jazz scene. The open-air events in Peitz, which presented—without exception—avant-garde sounds, were mass events hardly to be imagined today. Consensus on the level of nonconformity may have played a role. Furthermore, one should not forget that new and improvised music was shaped and sophisticated.

Dietmar Diesner, born in 1955, grew into this scene. At the age of 24, he debuted with the trio *Evidence*, which was known as an outstanding young band playing free improvisational music. He explored new techniques for saxophone, sometimes also in combination with live electronics. Since the beginning of the 1980s, he has played solo, taken it to a musical performance level. Dietmar Diesner has played with the outstanding GDR jazz improvisers and many international musicians, including Tony Oxley, Radu Mafatti, Elliott Sharp, David Moss and Jon Rose. In 1982, he started multimedia work with dancers, painters and writers. The group FINE, which he co-founded, achieved cult status in the GDR alternative art scene. Diesner participated in the project *Der Mann im Fahrstuhl* (*The Man in the Elevator*) with Heiner Müller and Heiner Goebbels and was also a member of the Noise-Rock bands *Kixx* and *Slawterhaus*. He plays duos with, among others, Sven-Åke Johansson, Peter Hollinger, Ulrich Gumpert, and trio set-ups with Johannes Bauer and Helmut Sachse. He is constantly involved in cross-genre projects.

Günter Sommer, drummer and percussionist, was born in 1943 in Dresden. He is part of the jazz generation that helped to bring about the breakthrough of free improvisational music in the GDR in the 1970s. At that time, he played in a trio with saxophonist Friedhelm Schönfeld and bassist Klaus Koch and, as of 1973, he played with

Fire in the Park



2

the band *Synopsis*, which kicked off free jazz in the GDR. The quartet *Synopsis*—Ernst-Ludwig Petrowsky (saxophone), Konrad Bauer (trombone) and Ulrich Gumpert (piano)—was newly formed by Sommer under the name *Zentralquartett*. In collaboration with partners like cathedral organist Hans-Günther Wauer and with his focus on the so-called “Hörmusik” [literally “listen to music”] solo programs, Sommer made his mark as a drummer and percussionist with an exceptional sound sensibility. Although playing free improvisation, he still keeps the drive of jazz in his music. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, he played in the trio *Chicago-Wuppertal-Dresden* with the trumpeter Leo Smith and bassist Peter Kowald. He has played with numerous musicians from all over the world and has constantly developed new projects, including literary-musical programs with Günter Grass [as well as Christa Wolf, Christoph Hein, and Rafik Schami] and music-theatrical programs with the dancer and choreographer Inge Mißmahl.

A great deal of collective experience with listening and playing resonates in the duo Günter Sommer and Dietmar Diesner, and their own experiences in the GDR certainly play a role in their music as well. Diesner and Sommer create pages based on the musical diaries of their biographies. The open-air concert turns into a performance, self-expression, homage and lament, as well as a satire on marching orders and the changing of the guard. Sound elements from other cultures remind us that we are not alone in the world.

On another level, the music reflects the process of hammering stone and casting metal, transforming work into spontaneous, sonorous actions, and undertakes material processing as sound exploration at the same time. The monument is included in the process of playing. And yet, Diesner leaves it at scratching at the base of the monument; and Sommer dares, at the most, to make the colossus’s bronze leg sing. Both musicians are focused on spontaneous action. One can hear everything: lamentation and scream, resistance and the triumph of the senses. Above all, however, this music acts like an outdoor fire in the face of a strange monument, a fire that flares-up wildly and warms the rain of the accompanying blues-sounding requiem.

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Bert Noglik is an internationally known jazz journalist and critic. His areas of expertise are contemporary jazz and improvisational music. Noglik has co-written *Woodstock am Karpfenteich* (*Woodstock at the Carp Pond*, 2011) and *Jazz im Gespräch* (*Talks about Jazz*, 1979). He has published several books, including *Klangspuren—Wege improvisierter Musik* (*Traces of Sound—Ways of Improvised Music*, 1990) and *Jazzwerkstatt International* (*Jazz Workshop International*, 1981), and has written numerous articles for print media, anthologies and CD releases, including *Free Jazz in der DDR* (*Free Jazz in the GDR*, Sony Music, 2000). He has directed several musical performance projects, such as “Survival Songs” (with David Moss), “Jazz Japan” and “Cape Town Traveller.” In addition to his regular radio work, Noglik has been the curator of the Berlin jazz festival “Sounds. No Walls” since 2009.