

THE LIMINAL

FEATURES

Punk's Kind Soul: Klaus Dinger remembered through his last project

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Rock music lost one of its greatest, most individual vocalists, guitarists and drummers on the 21st of March 2008 (has it really been that long?), when former Neu! founder and early Kraftwerk member Klaus Dinger passed away. Dinger was more than just a member of two (three, actually, but I'll come to La Düsseldorf later) key bands that have come to define styles and periods of German music: he was an innovator and a pioneer, developing musical, rhythmic and stylistic idioms that have seeped into the very fabric of modern rock music, notably the post-punk movement of the late seventies and early eighties, which has in turn informed just about every "indie" band of the last decade-and-a-half. Klaus Dinger was not just a cool cat who played in some seminal bands, he can now be looked on as a key figure in rock's nebulous and fractured history.

This is not merely a nostalgia piece, however. Almost five years to the day after Klaus Dinger's passing, this month will see the release of *Japandorf*, a record that is essentially the final hurrah of Dinger's most personal project, La Düsseldorf, named after his home city, even if a rights dispute with fellow founding member Hans Lampe meant the project had to be named the rather more cumbersome "Klaus Dinger + Japandorf". It's a fitting title, in many ways, but deceptive for, as his widow Miki Yui explains over the phone, this project evolved entirely out of Klaus's interest in a revived La Düsseldorf. "Klaus was aiming at a new project, so he started looking for people to work with, around '98/'99. In '98, he met Nakao [Masaki], a Japanese artist, and they became friends. Through Nakao, he was introduced to Japanese artists in Düsseldorf. He started working with Kazu [Onouchi], who is a Japanese engineer and drummer, to do a remix of *Viva*. *Viva* was the most important album to him and he wanted to make it better, and he wanted the remix to come out for the millenium." If La Düsseldorf was the starting point, Dinger's involvement with his hometown's Japanese community soon took the project in fresh directions when the time came to work on new material rather than the *Viva* remix, with Klaus inviting a number of people to come into his studio and record some sessions, from which the songs on Japandorf emerged.

The result is an album that clearly holds links to La Düsseldorf, but with key differences that show Dinger's evolution since the late seventies, as well as the important input of his new collaborators. As always, the core focus of the album is the city itself, as Miki Yui explains: "Japandorf has a lot to do with the city of Düsseldorf. From the beginnings of La Düsseldorf, Klaus was always singing about Düsseldorf, as a metaphor or motif, and Japandorf is a sort of extension of this. The Japanese community is quite popular in Düsseldorf, as well as around Germany, so it was a good motif to sing about." The core group of Masaki, Onouchi, Yui and Satoshi Okamoto certainly bring something new to Dinger's trademark "motorik" rock, even though they primarily came from art, rather than musical, backgrounds. "I studied fine art, and so moved to Germany to study in the city of Joseph Beuys", explains Yui. "I never studied music, but from '99, I started recording some small noises and ambience, so I was already doing something musical myself, before I met Klaus. I had never played an instrument or played with a band, but it came naturally. That was what Klaus wanted. He didn't want "finished" musicians, he wanted more of a fine art group of people to work with. Kazu comes from a background of Japanese painting and studied in the same university as me in Tokyo. Satoshi doesn't have a fine art background, he comes from design, but he did have a band back in Japan."

Yui paints a vivid picture of Dinger as an artist who wanted to learn from others even as he looked to share his own experience with a younger group of musicians. "He wanted to explore together [with a younger generation]. Klaus was never an old man, so he liked to explore situations where you didn't know what would happen". Proto- and post-punk, as I said! Perhaps most significantly, Dinger's new musicians were unfamiliar with his previous work. "I had heard that he did Neu! and La Düsseldorf but I was not very well-informed – I just met him on the street with Nakao! I didn't know about his fame, but he was a very impressive man. He had a very special aura. Very quiet and polite, but with a very strong energy".

With the initial recordings that led to Japandorf taking place around the turn of the millenium, I am surprised at how long it took for the album to see the light of day. "I think we were exploring. It also started at a time when music software and hardware were changing quite fast. As artists, we often didn't have perfect engineering ideas, so we were just trying things out by ourselves. If a computer crashed or we tried an idea that didn't work, that caused delays. Klaus invested quite a lot of money in his studio, so around 2006 we had a really good studio. On the artistic side, Klaus never said, when we were developing the songs, to do this or that. He always wanted people to have the time to come up with ideas themselves. Sometimes I would get a bit impatient and say 'Klaus, tell us what to do!', and he'd just reply 'Just practice'. He could tell us to do something, because he had enormous experience, but he would always let us work it out ourselves. You can hear that in the music, it grew very naturally." There is indeed a very organic feel to Japandorf, with multi-layered voices, for example, snaking around a typically relentless groove on "Immermannstrasse", whilst "ChaCha 2008" builds up layers of chugging guitars and cartoon-like vocals over 12 hypnotic minutes. For all that Dinger is a constant presence, you get the sense that this was an album produced entirely collaboratively. "Some are definitely Klaus songs", Yui clarifies, "ones that he carried for quite a long time, but it's a mixture, so the Klaus Dinger + Japandorf name is a good one."

Yet, for all this variety and these new approaches, the backbone of the album remains that immortal forward canter that already defined landmark Neu! and La Düsseldorf recordings (think 'Hero', 'Düsseldorf' or 'Hallogallo'), a reminder that Klaus Dinger pretty much invented a drum style that continues to define his music, long after he stepped away from behind the skins ("Klaus said he was done with drums after Neu!"). It's as if Dinger's DNA is welded into the music, and Miki Yui feels that this is a sign of his singular approach to music. "La Düsseldorf was never improvised. The songs always had strong pop structures that you could sing along to. Klaus was such a minimalist, he was always repeating his projects. He started Neu! and then La Düsseldorf, they were two contrary programmes. Then he did La! Neu?, which was very improvised, but still had song structures. And with Neu! getting re-released, he decided it was time to go back to La Düsseldorf. He was always repeating" The vision this engenders is of a circular muse, an obsession with craft and a constant desire to build on the sounds that apparently rang through Dinger's head from the early days of Kraftwerk up until that fateful day in 2008.

Although it was recorded last, Japandorf is set to be the first part in a trilogy of albums that will include *Viva* and its remix and another one named pre-Japandorf, which Yui describes as the "transition between La! Neu? and Japandorf." It seems to me that this trilogy serves as an elegy or tribute to Klaus Dinger, something Yui agrees with. "He knew when he did Neu! that it would be influential – he always said he was arrogant, and that it took 30 years for people to catch up. [Japandorf] was a big dream for Klaus and all of us, and the only thing that you can do after an artist's death is keep the music alive. We did an exhibition in Düsseldorf dedicated to Klaus Dinger, and published a book, which you can find on Facebook; and I'll be coming to Rough Trade in London to do a book launch and also celebrate Klaus and this Japandorf release. I'm very happy to talk about Klaus, to keep his memory alive." I can only say "Amen" to that, and recommend that any fan of rock music does the same by checking out Japandorf. We were lucky to have Klaus Dinger among us.