No home for Blixt, part 3

Caspar Brötzmann: amateur genius
You can't escape your fate. Caspar Brötzmann was born to be an extremist and would end up doing the family name proud. Whether his original intention was to rebel against the influence of his father, Peter Brötzmann, or ultimately just to come to terms with the family temperament in his own way is something even he probably no longer remembers. No matter. What he didn't want to be was a jazz musician. Brötzmann grew up in the era of the amateur genius, when naught percent virtuosity was needed for one hundred percent expression. An era in which the direction of music was defined as much by Arto Lindsay as the Einstürzende Neubauten.

Text: Wolf Kampmann

In 1987, Brötzmann debuted with his own band, Massaker, bringing the revival of the classic guitar trio to Germany. They were loud, brutal and maladjusted. Brötzmann saw himself as a rock guitarist but managed impressively to combine the spirit of The Jimi Hendrix Experience, Sonic Youth and the likes with his father's infamous intransigence. The similarity between the name of Brötzmann's band and that of Bill Laswell's first guitar trio was more coincidence than anything else. Or was it? Brötzmann senior had, after all, played with Laswell in the band Last Exit. Brötzmann junior can hardly have helped absorbing some of Sonny Sharrock's energy – the sensual yowling of his six-stringer, the intense abstraction of his blues, the darkly glimmering hellfire of his intonation. There must have been a sub-conscious relationship between Massaker and Massacre at the very least, considering that Laswell was a friend of the Brötzmann clan. And what Laswell had done for the power trio in America's New Jazz scene, Brötzmann made it his business to do for German rock.

Caspar Brötzmann's Massaker was louder and more devastating than anything else around at the end of the 1980s. The only band even comparable was the American hardcore trio Hüsker Dü, which by then was already way past its heyday. Wherever Brötzmann and Massaker appeared, they were met with enthusiasm and horror - and confusion, too, for they were too loud to be pigeonholed as either jazz or rock. It's clear in retrospect that before the days of Naked City, the pain threshold of the common ear was a lot lower than it is today. The filter applied by the zeitgeist of the 1980s simply didn't recognize the intimacy, authenticity and screaming emotionality that lay in Massaker's anthems.

Unlike Laswell, Caspar Brötzmann didn't release albums on a weekly basis. On the contrary, his music wore him down to the point of exhaustion. There was no "Last Exit" for him in the direction of drum&bass or ambient. Brötzmann knew only total music or total standstill. And so, after his last big hit "Mute Massacre" in 1999, he disappeared almost completely from the radar: Caspar Brötzmann, an icon of self-dissolution. The main victim of the massacre, it appeared, for a time at least, was Brötzmann himself. But just as Brötzmann the elder had demonstrated a phoenix-like ability to rise from the ashes of systematic self-destruction, Brötzmann the younger, as insiders know, remained active as a tour guitarist for Fanta 4.

In 2012 there were rumours that Massaker were reuniting in a new guise. Caspar Brötzmann had lost none of his radicality but gained the ability to self-reflect, it seemed. And then came 21 July 2012. The day no one had expected. For some
years, Peter Brötzmann had been part of a power trio with bassist Marino Pliakas and drummer Michael Wertmüller which turned the tables on Hendrix and made the tenor saxophone into a guitar. Its name was Full Blast. Suddenly though, at the Louis Rastic-curated A L'Arme festival in Berlin's Radialsystem, the programme announced an appearance by Pliakas and Wertmüller with Caspar Brötzmann back on guitar.

No one knew what to expect, least of all the three musicians. And that was a good thing, it turned out, when the supernova exploded. The audience was dazed, pinned to their seats in almost religious ecstasy, and the band apparently no less astounded at the eruption of musical genius from their three minds and six hands. An unforgettable, once-in-a-lifetime moment pulling after it a tail of inspiration as bright as a comet's. There was the fiery sound that blazed in the night sky over Berlin. There was the dignity with which the three musicians treasured the uniqueness of the moment. There was the ballet of fingers on Pliakas' bass, the ornaments drawn by Wertmüller's drumsticks, Brötzmann's great moment, the pose, almost Ritchie Blackmore-style, that indescribable density of ever more closely interlocking sounds. And the engrossed smile on the lips of the three protagonists who didn't understand what was happening either but who were willing to celebrate it with every cell of their tightly strung bodies. This concert had the appearance of being the beginning of all things.

It was followed by one further performance in Radialsystem a few weeks later for which the trio were joined by FM Einheit, a special guest who increased the noise factor using railway springs and drills. In the meantime, a name had been settled upon: NoHome, because a home for this kind of music had still to be found. Brötzmann, Pliakas and Wertmüller are coming together again in Moers. The band is preceded by its reputation and the audience might just be in for another supernova. And yet, as always, anything could happen.