

Those Kids Must Choke - new record label captures free improv on disc

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BEIRUT: "The records I want to release on this label are the records I want to own," says 26-year-old musician Charbel Haber with characteristically earnest enthusiasm.

For nearly a decade, Haber has been singing and heavily distorting the sounds of his guitar with the experimental Beirut-based rock band Scrambled Eggs, a foursome that includes guitarist Marc Codsí, bassist Tony Aliyeh, and drummer Said Aliyeh. Along the way, Haber and his colleagues have also been delving ever more deeply into the mechanics of free improvisation - a genre of music spearheaded by saxophonist Evan Parker and guitarist Derek Bailey in the late 1960s, drawing on the techniques of free jazz as played by John Coltrane and Cecil Taylor and aligned with the avant-garde approach of such daring classical composers as John Cage.

Over the past few decades, free improv has developed into a highly abstract and challenging style. It maintains close ties to jazz and overlaps with the more ambient and adventurous strains of minimal techno and electronic dance music. But as a musical practice that is most fully expressed live and in performance, free improv is ephemeral, unconventional, often abrasive and structurally spare. Nonetheless, it has gathered loyal adherents who at this point form a unique international network, whereby a niche of musicians in one city can link up easily to likeminded musicians in another, no matter how far the distance between them.

In Beirut, free improv has evolved into its own small but sturdy subculture, thanks to the establishment of MILL (an association for free improv in Lebanon founded by trumpeter Mazen Kerbaj and guitarist Sharif Sehnaoui), Beirut's annual Irtijal free improv festival, and seasons of less formal concerts such as the Rue 24 summer improv series and MILL's performances and workshops held under the banner of "Spring Meetings." Now, after a period of necessary incubation, the scene seems set for another layer of self-consolidation - a record label. Haber has just released two discs on the newly minted Those Kids Must Choke Records, and he is hoping to issue eight more by the end of 2005.

As a name, Those Kids Must Choke is a clear nod to the difficulty free improv music poses to the public. But for all its youthful energy and petulant posturing (the logo for the label is a cartoon rendering of an impish young woman holding a skull-embossed lollipop behind her back), the label's first release is a remarkably mature and sophisticated stint. Joe Ghosn, an electronic musician based in Paris, records under the name Discipline. His untitled, seven-track, 50-minute contribution consists almost exclusively of drones - low, monotonous, vaguely mechanical sounds that are reminiscent of an as-yet unrecorded soundtrack to Fritz Lang's "Metropolis," or a novel by Haruki Murakami that would probably prove to be impossible to adapt into a movie anyway. The Discipline album opens with a stunning and strangely beautiful 30-minute track, beginning with what sounds like gospel music piped into a subaqueous vessel and progressing through a number of ponderous, rhythmic ups and downs, sonic reprises, and melodic moments. And in that sense, it perfectly encapsulates the potential of free improv on disc.

The most common complaint about this style of music is that it's noise and nothing but. Yet as the Discipline album attests, free improv at its best does establish its own ground rules. There is spontaneity, to be sure, but it is built with precision into a grid of sounds and rhythms and textures. There is a beginning, a build-up, a climax, and an end to these tracks. They are at times beautiful, mysterious, provocative, and intense.

Similarly, the second release on Those Kids Must Choke is Scrambled Eggs' third studio album, "Nevermind Where Just Drive." The first two Scrambled Eggs releases were produced by CD-Theque, the venerable Beirut record store with shops in Achrafieh and Hamra. The fourth Scrambled Eggs album will also likely be recorded on CD-Theque's in-house label. But the third is a departure in that it is completely instrumental and experimental. There are no lyrics and no discernible guitar riffs but rather a series of moods - short studies on texture and sound. Like Discipline, "Nevermind Where Just Drive" is, as a sustained piece of music, brief yet surprisingly accomplished. It opens with a prelude of guitar strings and then microscopically breaks down sound and rhythm. The second track uses the bass to build suspense into five minutes of static, which then breaks out into a whoosh of drums as exhilarating as two wildly discordant guitar solos coming back together on Television's "Little Johnny Jewel."

"The mission here," says Haber, "is to document what's happening in Beirut, our side of the story. The point is not to get anything out of it in the end," he adds, but to do it solely for the sake of expression. Haber, who spent time in his youth living in Paris, is acutely aware that what he's doing with the label in Beirut would be impossible to accomplish elsewhere, in cities where competition for time and resources is fierce. Yet he is also acutely aware that what he's doing with the label in Beirut is an attempt to bolster the strength of the city's young and restless contemporary culture, and that in terms of funneling that energy into a productive framework, it is an effort that is sorely needed.

The idea for Those Kids Must Choke has been germinating for a year now. Haber has digested a great deal of advice, help, and support from friends, colleagues, and fellow musicians. Illustrating the rich potential that exists locally for collaborative efforts, the contemporary art dealer Fadi Mogabgab, himself a musician who spent years playing percussion during Monday jam sessions at the Quadrangle in Hazmieh, is producing or co-producing the CDs released on Those Kids Must Choke. Cedrelle Farhat recorded and mixed the Scrambled Eggs album, Yann Charaoui mastered it, Yara Raffoul pitched in the art

direction for the album sleeve. Haber will release 500 copies of each disc and modestly hopes to sell 100. He is handling distribution piecemeal for now, selling the albums at the gallery Espace SD in Gemmayzeh and CD-Theque. Those Kids Must Choke releases will also be available at select record stores in Paris, and Haber is looking into options in London and New York.

Still, he's not going fully international just yet. "The CDs released on this label, in the first period," he explains, "will always have a connection to the scene in Beirut." That caveat could be extended to recording the work of Lebanese musicians living abroad or foreign musicians who come here to perform. Haber is suitably open to new ideas. As he explains on the label's Web site, "Those Kids Must Choke is a Lebanese label of experimental music, a witness of our time, of a scene influenced by lo-fi experimental rock and electronic laboratories of free improvised music. We are a label awakening at the same time as the scene ... We are meant to be a platform on which the young scene can stand to work, collaborate with foreign musicians, archive their tries, [and] witness the living sounds that shake their towns."

In a city as riddled as Beirut with divisions of politics, religion, culture and (ever present yet rarely articulated) class, Those Kids Must Choke is an assertion of something new. As a label and as a platform for creative work, it belongs distinctly to the present. The music is not weighed down by the past or by history or by tradition. It is young and looking ever so slightly forward rather than back. And it captures the noise of contemporary life, as jarring and fleeting as that noise may be.

Joe Ghosn's *Discipline and Scrambled Eggs* Nevermind Where Just Drive are both available now on Those Kids Must Choke Records. For more information, check out www.zwvx.org/diffusion/thosekidsmustchoke