The cybernetic notion of "feedback" is described as either positive or negative. Positive feedback is a self-generating mechanism without checks or limits that produces increasing entropy or chaos over time. In terms of music it is characterized by the circuited guitar-amp-guitar whine of such as the 13th Floor Elevators, the Velvet Undergound, or the Grateful Dead. Conversely, negative feedback is the regulated result of a system maintained by some kind of self-checking mechanism like a thermostat. Its musical equivalent is less obvious, but after a couple of hours' argument down the pub we settled on one of two possibilties: either the smooth aggregate of elevator muzak, or the hypnotic repetition of classic Krautrock.

Malcolm Mooney was the orginial vocalist in seminal German Krautrock band Can, whose founding personnel were listed on the sleeve of their first official release *Monster Movie* (1969) as:

"Irmin Schmidt – Aminaspace co-ordinator & organ laser, Jaki Liebzeit – propulsion engineer & space chart reader, Holger Czukay – hot from Vietnam; technical laboratory chief & red-armed bass, Michael Karoli – sonar & radared guitar pilot, Malcolm Mooney – linguistic space communicator."

Mooney sang on *Monster Movie*, as well as its precursor, *Prepare to Meet Thy Pnoom*, which was abandoned at the time but released 13 years later as *Delay 1968*. He left the band shortly afterwards, replaced by Japanese Damo Suzuki, who the band found busking in Munich. In 1986, Mooney regrouped with the other core members in France to record *Rite Time* (released in 1989) as well as music for Wim Wenders' film *Until the End of the World* (1991). He continues to make music, as well as visual art in multiple mediums.

The interview was based on a set of questions collated from a number of people, and arranged via Kitty Scott (thanks again).

Front cover: Malcolm Mooney, *In the Wind*, charcoal on paper, 2010

Banff, July 26, 2012

J: Can you recall when, how, and why you all decided on the name Can? According to some accounts, one of the band retrospectively claimed it as standing for Communism-Anarchism-Nihilism. Was that a joke, or serious, or both?

M: Actually it was me who named the band. I was in France when I met Hildegard, Irmin Schmidt's wife, who started talking about a studio in Germany. At first I thought she meant an art studio—an atelier, not a recording studio. Then Irmin and Holger asked me whether I could sing, and actually I HAD sung in various situations before, so I said sure, let's go do it … only first I had to go to Copenhagen because all my clothes and stuff were there. I'd just come back from India, and on the way back I met a Danish guy in what must have been Tehran. The first stop was Yugoslavia; he decided to stay there, but asked us to drive his car all the way back to Denmark, even though we didn't have any papers or anything. Skipping ahead, when I finally arrived in Cologne and got together with the band—the so-called band—I realized I had to use the situation to figure something out for myself, which was, basically, can I do this? (Laughs.) And then I decided well, yes, I CAN—and so that became the name of the band.

There's some documentation about the name standing for Communism, Anarchy, and Nihilism, but I'm not sure whoever said it, Jaki or Irmin, meant it seriously, because I don't recall anyone being that politically motivated, even though there were a lot of what you might think of as political things going on musically. In retrospect I'd say the letters might better stand for Cooperation, Attentiveness, and Notation. That makes more sense to me because all of us in Can were trying to cooperate—not only in terms of playing the music itself, but also in the sense of the cooperation of different backgrounds and styles, from jazz drummers to folk singers to classical musicians to electronic engineers. Not to mention the fact that they were all German, while I was an African American arriving via a very circuitous route from New York, including Europe, India, and Asia.

I have to laugh at that, actually, because I was just watching a young comedian who was saying, you know, what IS an African American? Well,

really, just American. See, my name is Malcolm, Scottish, and Mooney, Irish, and I don't know what the hell that's all about. (Laughs.) The whole idea of people thinking they come from someplace in that sense is strange to me—especially in the so-called New World. I get a big kick out of it, actually. My family's been here for 60 years, a hundred years, but where were they a hundred or two hundred years before that, you know? You fly over the country and you don't see any borderlines, so what ARE all these borders we're talking about, exactly?

J: What led you to travel in Europe in the first place?

M: The initial reason was because I didn't want to be in the war. I didn't KNOW anyone from Vietnam, you know? My father was in the Navy, my uncle was in the Air Force—all my family were in some part of the military; but when I asked my uncle years later if he thought I'd done the wrong thing, he said no, not at all. On that trip we'd traveled from Europe to what I guess was then called Asia Minor. It was truly an eye-opening experience, and I never had any difficulty with ANYone the whole time, and so to me that was part of the reason to avoid the conflict. I remember being in the American embassy in Munich when an official asked us, hey, why aren't you guys in the war … and we sort of backed slowly out the door (Laughs.). But I go to these military parades in the States, and I don't disrespect these guys at all, these soldiers—they simply feel they have to do it.

J: You just took a different route.

M: Exactly.

J: And that led you to these people playing music who asked you to sing, and—if I understand you right—your personal "can I do it?" met with a collective "can WE do it?"

M: Yeah: can it happen? … can it be done?

J: So the name is really Can with a question mark rather than an exclamation mark.

M: Yeah, yeah. Then again, everybody seemed to have their own ideas about the name. Jaki once told me, for instance, that in Turkish the word means something like "life-force"—not the actual meaning of the word but the sound of it. Now Jaki was a really fascinating drummer, always very much in the present, but also able to think and play ahead of himself. He was an inspiration, and it made me realize I could do something similar … it's not mind-reading, exactly, but it IS something like a spirit. For "Last Night's Sleep" on *Rite Time*, for instance, I composed a lyric on the plane going over to France, and when I got to the studio and we started playing, the words fit the rhythm exactly. It becomes like a new child. Holger talks about *spontaneous composition,* where things first gel and then become something you don't have any control over.

J: Were there certain people in the band facilitating this spontaneous energy—holding it together or choreographing it?

M: At the beginning there was some kind of idea that was probably started by Irmin, who was a director, a composer, and a conductor, as well as a keyboard player. He drew a diagram to map whatever we'd been improvising—an A-B, A-B, A-B-C kind of thing, but a linear abstraction rather than regular music notation. That was the impetus for a structure. I should point out, though, that I don't speak or understand German, and it was only years later that I realized I had little idea of what was actually going on back then. Everybody was probably fighting about stuff all the time. Every-one else in the band speaks English and German, and probably French too, but all I'm hearing is TONE. Plus I was probably a little nervous about being in that situation.

Actually, I think I was some kind of test principle: let's see what will happen to Malcolm if we do this … while I'm equally thinking, let's see what will happen to the band if I do THIS! It was reciprocal: my vocals became an expression of the rhythms and melodies, but at the same time they also influenced them. Holger talks about how my vocals took the band in a direction they hadn't planned on going, but as far as I recall no-one seemed to know exactly what that direction was supposed to be in the first place —only that we were trying to go *somewhere.* But this in itself is of course already a different kind of starting point from deliberately trying to make blues or rock'n'roll or classical music. Let's see if these components,

these five, six people, can actually do something.

To go back to Communism, Anarchism, and Nihilism for a minute, nihilism means something like the negation of meaning, so if you avoid playing music according to prior "meanings"—recognized types—you determine a new direction by unconsciously eliminating all that doesn't fit your sense of where to go. And that in turn becomes a new kind of fitting, which gets added to the general pool of information, music from all over the world, worlds of memory—the universal RAM. Within the negative, then, there's always a positive, because otherwise you wouldn't be able to tell one from the other. I had this conversation with someone recently, about people in Germany trying to break away from the old ideology that set in back in the Second World War. It was a new spirit—everybody's trying to get away from the old structure there, just as much as I was trying to get away from what was going on in the 1960s in America.

J: Two lines of flight crossing.

M: Yeah exactly—a double migration, and then there's a meeting point. At the time, of course, you don't know if it's working or not; what that might even MEAN. I remember all the clubs, Dusseldorf or wherever, where there were seven or eight people; or in Zurich I think it was, being told to stop after one song because we were too loud. For me, the recording sessions were the most important. The live sessions were difficult because we were trying to compose *at the time,* not just repeat something we'd already composed, and naturally it doesn't always work.

J: As you were saying, it demands a lot of attentiveness.

M: That's the other keyword: attentiveness. So you have cooperation and attentiveness, and if you're playing music but not listening to the other players, I think you've lost sight of the whole point.

J: But there are always egos.

M: Oh, big time, right.

J: How do you deal with that … what's your philosophy? (Laughs.)

M: When I was younger, I think my ego was kind of loose, or temperate. Actually, it was a long time before I realized there were egos involved in making the music. Egos are a variable. They cause friction. Sometimes that friction can cause something positive to happen, but of course it can be negative too. It breaks up a lot of bands, but then that might lead to those musicians forming new bands, which is not a bad thing—it just becomes another generation of music, a continuum.

J: Speaking of friction, in terms of Can's sound, you're often approaching one steady note, almost a drone … that duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh … then at other moments it seems some instruments begin revolting against the note and suddenly evolve into a kind of progression that brings the whole thing back closer towards a song. And then on towards collapse again, and another steady note.

M: Perhaps the moments you're talking about are when the rhythms don't quite align. As Holger says, the rhythm is perpetually collapsing—it collapses and then rebuilds itself. I've been listening to those recent *Lost and Found* Can tapes, and one track (I think it might be "Waiting for the Streetcar") is based on the idea of a 7/4, which is basically a round; and because the composition comes back round on itself, you can hear very clearly how the structure breaks. In fact, in this case the broken structure is the very ESSENCE of the structure. As it evolves, it becomes another rhythm, and when it becomes another rhythm, each member of the band is trying to make sure the new one holds. (Laughs.) At a certain point it becomes a matter of dexterity—how long can you hold that beat for? You hear it in African drumming: the beat rises and falls, at some point someone loses the beat, and this is the tell-tale sign that the rest of the players have to segue somewhere else. When I listen to Can—even stuff with Damo that I wasn't involved in, I can hear when the end of the song has begun, when the function of the band can't go any further with that particular piece.

J: Normally we'd understand cooperation to be something affirmative, and collapse to be something negative, but as you describe it, the collapse is an expression—

M: OF the cooperation. (Laughs.)

J: —of the cooperation defining its own limits.

M: Right.

J: I've been told that there's some sort of psychedelic backstory behind your recycling the nursery rhyme, "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary." Is that so?

M: A couple of years ago when I was working as an artist's assistant, my boss used to say, "do you want the truth or the lie?" After hearing his stories I started to think that there wasn't much of a difference after all. The fact is, this is a family secret. Anyone can imagine whatever they'd like to imagine, and they will anyway. But OK, now the truth: it was nothing to do with Mary Queen of Scots. It was basically about a person, a personal experience, and that last line about "pretty men all in a row" was to do with the fact that this particular girlfriend had so many boyfriends that I was beside myself. (Laughs.) Let's just say I'd always thought I was the key factor and it had become apparent that that wasn't the case.

J: And regarding other double entendres, there are drug references —to a particular kind of amphetamine?

M: Oh yeah, but that's not "Mary," that's in "She brings the rain." It's called Raven's Wing: "I'm flying on a raven's wing." In "Mary" there's: "Smoked a high cool cigarette / Turned around and then we left / Smiling as the wave began to grow." The fact is, I haven't been able to touch the stuff, hallucinogenics, for the last 20 years. I made a commitment that if I couldn't sing without that kind of stimulus, then I don't need to be doing it, because my painting, for example, doesn't work like that. My painting comes from simply being stimulated by doing the painting itself, it's SELF-generative, stimulated and generated by LIFE. Looking back, I never thought I felt high at the time, but I know that singing and composing in the way I did seemed to come very easy. Anyway, yeah, the lyric in that was basically about smoking, the raven's wing was about amphetamine, and "cement of yellow" was about hallucinating the sidewalk as being yellow instead of grey. But more than all of that the song was again mostly about a love affair, about a person, not about the drugs at all, really.

J: Let's return to the structural questions we've been talking about: first how composition can happen when you choose not to depart from a pre-established formula; then how music can be structured *on the fly* in order to experience a state in which you're all playing INTO each other. Does that term "psychedelia" describe any of this?

M: There are places where the music is discussed through talking about the music, and there are places when it is discussed through the music itself. I never thought of Can as psychedelic, maybe only in terms of "altered states." I think anybody who plays music—or composes in any medium, really—is in an altered state. You have to be in an altered state to actually take an instrument and make a sound. I recently said to a friend of mine who plays, you know, you can ingest whatever you like but it's never gonna make you play any better than the capacity you already have. Some people can do it and sound great, of course, simply because they already have the skill and technique down.

In the middle of a song called "Below this Level," I say what sounds like "psychiatric," but it's actually p-s-y-c-h-e as in "psyched-out," then AC, as in "alternating current," and then the whole thing is a t-r-i-c-k. So it's actually a *psyche-AC-trick.* In other words, you've been tricked into thinking that your psyche has moved on to someplace else, when really you were there all along. So my point of view is that it's just a boost, or CAN be a boost, to whatever you already have. Then the issue becomes whether you can control that altered state. Can you really USE the drug? All this equally applies to smoking a cigarette—it might seem to help somehow, but it doesn't change the impetus or the structure.

J: There's one moment that sticks in my mind when you go from singing articulated words to singing only half-articulated or maybe DIS-articulated words, and this transition seems like a radical moment. How does that happen: is this the composition purposefully collapsing, or have you just run out of things to say?

M: It's not that I wanna say anything at all, that's not the issue. It's more the fact that I picked up on the drummer. I do it with the bands I play with now too: I like the rhythm and I try to emphasize it.

J: Mimicking the rhythm.

M: Well, mimicking the rhythm is one thing, but the point is really to change it. If you're just mimicking the rhythm you're ONLY emphasizing it, but if you gradually try to counter the rhythm or start a polyrhythmic thing, you begin to create another beat. And when you do that, it moves, or CAN move, the rest of the band—if they hear it—to change what they're doing. The key factor for me is simply not to be static. In order not to be static you have to force a change, and that's where the collapse comes in again. But the crucial thing with a band like Can is that ANYONE can cause it. It takes one person to do it, and it takes the other members of the band to say, I like that, I'll go in that direction; and this in itself creates the dynamic—the moments where you can hear them start to think about something else, somewhere else to go. That's what I look for. I listen to other music and nine times out of ten I don't hear that dynamic. The fact is, people are aware of their vulnerability, that they may lose their job, so they play it safe.

J: At some point in the song "Father Cannot Yell," the authority of the voice suddenly transforms into something else—when that eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh comes in from the side, like a call-and-response with itself.

M: Yeah, it's two tracks layered over each other. Live, though, I use echo on one channel and flange on the other. I remember being back in the studio with Can in 1986 or something, and I miss a note. Usually we'd go back and I'd sing it again, but they say, no, no, don't worry about it, Malcolm, I got it over here … then they go to the keyboard, up on the screen is the notation, and they just change the notation to alter the pitch of what I'd sung wrong. What the hell, man, I don't even have to be here!

I sometimes work with automatic drawings, because I always think, why should I try to see the same way a camera sees? Same with the music: the goal is to work through concepts, not to merely appropriate stuff, but to extend the visual or musical construct. It's all in the editing. Can did a lot of editing in the mind AS we played—I remember Jaki composing drum tracks completely aware of what he would do later by overdubbing to emphasize or complicate the rhythm. But there was a lot of editing after we played too.

J: Usually when the musicians start to improvise it indicates a solo break, then as a singer you've got find something else to do—dance around on stage or whatever. How did you deal with going in and out of the music, allowing for instrumental passages and knowing when to enter again?

M: With early Can I was exuberant about participating as an instrument, equivalent to the others, so I'd hear certain things happening, like the drum solo with Jaki in "Yoo Doo Right," and always wanted to play along. But I think in time I learned to ease off. At some points I realized there are simply certain areas you can't get to with the sound of a the voice, then it becomes counter-productive to the overall sound, so I would back away from the mic. At other points I would hear the sound saying "come in … do something here …"—that's the awareness I was talking about.

J: So you don't actually stop, you just step away from the mic and carry on singing out of range?

M: Well, I might speak to myself, yeah. I might sing to myself to figure out where or how I might fit back into the composition. Or in fact, in those moments when I'm articulating not with words but with the beat, I often find myself trying to emphasize what somebody else was doing, as I said. Also I think psychologically, on something like "Father Cannot Yell," I might have been trying to emphasize on a physicality, a physical state. "Father Cannot Yell" was a very strange song—I still don't know if the father could or couldn't yell. (Laughs.) The whole thing comes from a drawing I did in India. I looked down and a place came to my mind, but then I'm also in Calcutta looking out on this field at these trees, still imagining this fantasy place. And so the "syndrome" in the song isn't what you think it is—it's the drum, the sign of the drum, the syn-drum, syn-drone. The characters are a man and a woman, a sexual relationship, and it's about a person who doesn't understand their position. The woman is lying there waiting and the father cannot yell, so they've come together at this point in the situation, and that's where the main emphasis is …

J: So the father cannot yell … but you CAN stutter! (Laughs.) Maybe the de-de-de-de-de-de-de replaces the yelling because in that situation it's the best thing to do, the only thing to do—because it's beyond sense.

M: Yeah, yeah.

J: Speaking about the relationship between your artistic practice and the musical practice—working by yourself, finding your own drawings, motifs, and then entering into a collaboration … how does that work for you?

M: It's all at an unconscious level. I mean, a person playing an instrument is drawing on particular sources—what they've played before and heard before, and transferring that information via their instrument. They may know something about different musicians who've done it before, and they copy it or deviate from it to greater or lesser degrees. But in articulating a poem, with actual hard meanings attached to the spoken words, you're more directly transferring something of yourself, because either you've composed it from your own experience, or you've developed it from a fictitious story that also originated in yourself. At least, it's like that in my case. And so you start to work on the idea that this is a piece or a part of you, or conversely that you're TRYING to make into you.

J: But do you think of yourself as operating in two different positions—being by yourself and being within a group?

M: Well, most of my pieces are poems that I've written alone, then I adjust them according to the band I'm working with. There's one piece we do now, for example, called, "And Then There's Music," and the idea is that the band actually plays the response to my call. So I'll say something, then the band will play a section based on what I just said, then I give each band member an opportunity to play a solo. But the key factor is that then we all come back to the structure, which is "… and then there's music." I've always thought that the rest of the band, the musical part, is more attuned to something at a higher level than myself, for some reason. I think they have an insight I don't have, so I just tend to let them go ahead … then when they do THAT, I'm able to figure out something WITHIN it. You know, I'm looking at this cloud forming on that mountain out there [nods outside] and it's just like what we're talking about. Soon the mountain will be gone. (Laughs.)

J: The clouds here are strange. Sometimes they seem more massive than the mountains.

M: I did a painting in Pasadena, California—a watercolor that shows this gas, this cloud, this gaseous formation that looks like a structure. And then there's this solid thing behind it, a mountain. That describes the whole idea of the music. It's what I call "dynamic suddenism," which is what I'm trying to write about at the moment … I'm slowly developing this idea, you know, (Laughs.) about things that happen suddenly.

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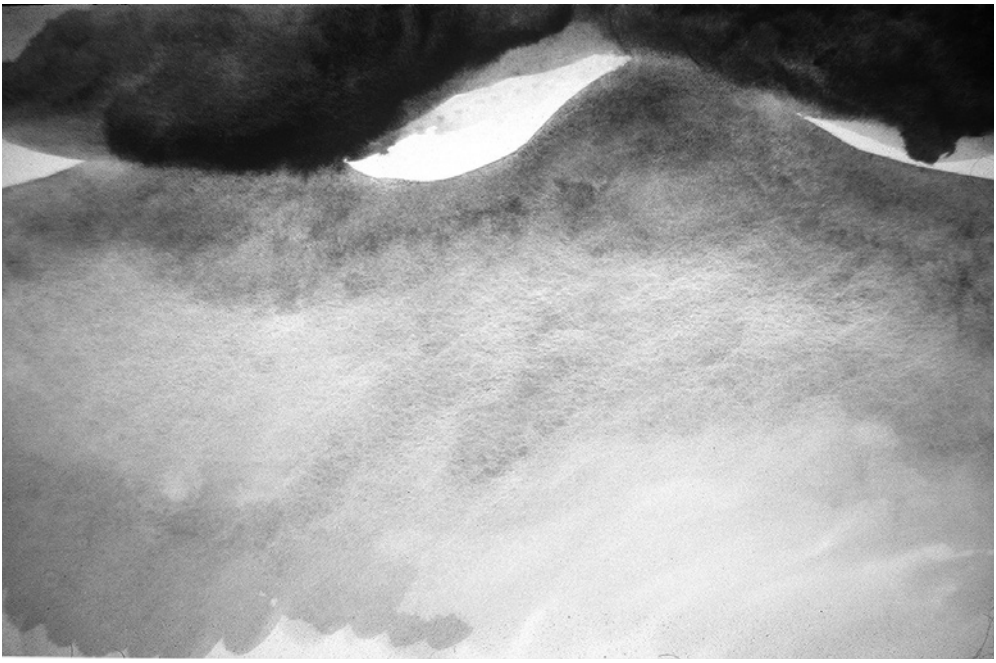

Malcolm Mooney, *When the Clouds Kissed the Mountains*, watercolor on paper, 1986