



James Kirby's move from the prankish plunderphonics of V/Vm to the haunted dancehall distortions of the **The Caretaker** and *The Stranger* is part of a longer game plan to map sonic disappearances, from lost popular musics to folk memories of the Miners' Strike.
By Mark Fisher
Photography by Jan Stradtman

"I have always been fascinated by memory and its recall, especially where sound is concerned," says James Kirby, aka The Caretaker, from his current base in Berlin. "Some things we remember easily and others we never seem to grasp. That idea was developed more on the box set I did [*Theoretically Pure Anterograde Amnesia*, 2006], which was based around a specific form of amnesia where sufferers can remember things from the past but are unable to remember new things. To recreate that in sound was a challenge that I relished, really. I realised the only way was to make a disorientating set with very few reference points. Fragments of melody breaking out of this monotonous tone and audio quagmire. Even if you listen over and over to all the songs, you still can't remember when these melodies will come in. You have no favourite tracks, it's like a dream you are trying to remember. Certain things are clear but the details are still buried and distant."

Kirby's description perfectly captures the unsettling experience of listening to *Theoretically Pure Anterograde Amnesia*. With the release of the six CD box set, his project The Caretaker crossed over from being an exercise in atmospheric nostalgia to being a harrowing investigation of memory disorder. The box set is more like a sonic installation than a record, a work whose conceptual and textural richness puts much sound art to shame. The first three Caretaker records – *Selected Memories From The Haunted Ballroom* (1999), *A Stairway To The Stars* (2001) and *We'll All Go Riding On A Rainbow* (2003) – swathed sampled British tearoom schmaltz in a gaslit halo of reverb and crackle. On *Theoretically Pure Anterograde Amnesia*, the effects and the surface noise take over, so that instead of a gently dub-dilapidated pop, there is an unnavigable murk, as abstract and minimal as a Beckett landscape. Echoes and reverberations float free of any originating sound source in a sea of hiss and static. If the earlier records suggested spaces that were mildewed but still magnificent – grand hotels gone to seed, long abandoned ballrooms – *Theoretically Pure Anterograde Amnesia* invokes sites that have deteriorated into total dereliction, where every unidentified noise is pregnant with menace. The 72 tracks – all of them numbered rather than named – simulate the amnesiac condition, and the few fragments of well known tunes that occasionally flare in the gloom are intermittent islands of familiarity in a world that has become hostile and unrecognisable.

"Maybe it's a dark humour, a kind of audio black comedy," Kirby says of The Caretaker, but the solemnity of the project belies his reputation as a prankster behind V/Vm, initially a duo with Andy McGregor. Launched in 1996 in Manchester, they notoriously released a version of Lieutenant Pigeon's "Mouldy Old Dough" just after appearing on the cover of *The Wire* 176 (October 1998) under the headline "Harder! Faster! Louder!". The 7" was one of a series

of manglings of songs by the likes of Chris de Burgh, John Lennon and Elton John.

It is the focus on cultural memory that holds together all of Kirby's work, including the V/Vm mash-ups. If V/Vm's (sub)versions of pop come from the brash side of postmodern pastiche, then The Caretaker is about the dark side of culture retrospection. *Theoretically Pure Anterograde Amnesia* was in many ways a diagnosis of a cultural pathology. It might seem strange to describe a culture that is so dominated by past forms as being amnesiac, but the kind of nostalgia that is now so pervasive may best be characterised not as a longing for the past so much as an inability to make new memories. Fredric Jameson described one of the impasses of postmodern culture as the inability "to focus our own present, as though we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience". The past keeps coming back because the present cannot be remembered. Memory disorders have recurred as themes in the popular cinema of the past decade or so: it's theoretically pure anterograde amnesia that afflicts Leonard, the lead character in Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), while the massively successful *Bourne* films have been preoccupied with memory loss. It is not surprising that anxieties about memory should continually surface in late capitalism, where, as Jameson and others have argued, perpetual economic instability and the rapid turnover of ephemeral images lead to a breakdown in any coherent sense of temporality.

Kirby has approached the failure of the future from a different angle on another of his projects, 2006's *The Death Of Rave*. Here, rave is desubstantialised, stripped of all bass weight and drum propulsion, reduced to shimmer and haze. The tracks sound like they are being heard from outside a club – a horribly accurate sonic metaphor, perhaps, for our current state of exile from the future-shocking rate of innovation that dance music achieved in the 1980s and 90s. "That project really is in its infancy," Kirby says. "It came about as part of the V/Vm 365 project where the aim was to make one audio track a day. I used to go to raves when I was younger, went through that whole explosion in electronic music from 1987 to around 1992–93, when it seemed like there was a new genre every single week. It was an amazing time in music, to hear so many things happening and so many new possibilities opening up, and to see and feel the energy of new music exploding on dancefloors and in clubs. I think *The Death Of Rave* is about the loss of that spirit, and a total loss of energy in most electronic musics across the board.

"I feel sorry these days for people when I go to clubs, as that energy isn't there any more. I mean, we have some so-called very cool clubs in Berlin such as Watergate and Berghain, but you compare them to those back in the late 80s and early 90s in Manchester and it really is no comparison. Of course new things pop up, but the difference now really is that if something explodes, then before it can grow naturally, people have strangled it to death with parodies online, and often a scene or new style is dead before it even surfaces. House and Techno, for instance, took a long time to mature in Chicago and Detroit. Now there is no time, once an idea is out of the rabbit's hat, it's copied ad infinitum until the energy is gone.

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