

## **MaxMagazine / UltraKarl**

### **Interview with Karl Bartos, the star of Electronic Music And Visualisation Festival (Plock, Poland, 6th August 2005).**

Polish electronic music fans had a big dilemma on the first weekend of August, while two very similar events took place. In Plock there was the first edition of Electronic Music And Visualisation Festival (FeMEV), and in Gdynia – equally electronic Astigmatic event, moved there from ... Plock. My main reason for choosing FeMEV was its line-up. For FeMEV it contained Karl Bartos, member of legendary KW quartet for 15 years.

Exclusively for Max Magazine I interviewed him, making his only interview during his visit in Poland. Karl Bartos found some time for me after a rehearsal. He came pretty relaxed and in great mood. He turned out to be an interesting interlocutor, far from any trivia.

Here's what he told me on a Vistula river beach.



**fantomasz:** Hello, great to see you in Plock.

**Karl Bartos:** Hello, I'm glad to be here in Poland.

It's been 24 years since you last played in Poland. In August 1981 KW had a tour of 6 concerts in our country. For the Poles these were extraordinary times and extraordinary concerts. The "Solidarnosc - Solidarity" revolt had just begun against the communist party regime and your performances were of great

importance. You brought hope to our nation, you became the symbol of free, democratic western Europe. Many people still consider those concerts as one of the most important musical events in Poland of that time. Did you have the same feelings about these events? How do you recall them today?

It's so long ago, many details I can't remember. I know there were extraordinary times. The big trouble was that we were not allowed to talk to anybody, no communication even with the audience. I especially remember the Warsaw concert...

**In Torwar hall.**

Exactly. In front of us, in the second row, sat Russian soldiers. They were very grim, none smiled. Suddenly during "Die Roboter" Ralf Hutter sang that phrase in Russian "Ja tvoi sluga ja tvoi rabotnik" (I am your servant, I am your worker). I looked at them, their faces were amusingly astonished. They were totally surprised by Russian words.

Listening to your music, both the earlier ones from Esperanto and the newest from Communication, one can think you treat music not only as source of entertainment. It has much more potential than escapism. What do you think is the role of music?

Music is a great mystery. Left alone, the chords have no sense and melodies mean nothing. Music in its depth is nothing but pure mathematics. We physically feel the sounds that impact our feelings and remain in our hearts. They change us. I think the role of music is to soothe, to bring relief. This is its main goal. Music is magic and we don't know why.

**What is the inspiration for you?**

Modern technology and electronic media, that's what I'm most interested in. They change the contents and meaning of our culture. The camera, tape recorder, TV etc. change and our thoughts, imaginations, feelings and the way we think and feel change likewise. We are integrated with technology. I generally mean communication – this is the basic subject that I'm especially interested in.

**Who is Karl Bartos today? A musician, producer, composer,**

**academy professor?**

All of them. Each of these functions influences the rest. At the same time I am a professor in Berlin Academy of Arts and a typical artist. The benefit is that I have many different thoughts and ideas. I have to admit that I work a lot on sound rather than on music. Our society changes and people react to sounds differently. My domain is Auditory Media Design and I'm interested in sound anthropology. Think of your sound biography. If you go back to the earliest music you remember, different things come to your mind: mother's voice, first school dance, music in the car, cinema or theatre. That's the centre of my interest, what we feel when listening to music, how we remember it. That's what I talk about with my students. About the anthropology of sound.



**You're the biggest name of this Plock festival line-up...**

**Really?**

**Really. How do you perceive the fact that without the works of you and your KW teammates, many other musicians and artists performing here wouldn't exist? How do you feel as the father**

(or grandfather) of contemporary electronic music?

That's not how I think, it's an exaggeration. When I look into the past, I think of Johann Sebastian Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven, Johannes Brahms and many other painters and writers. Especially about John Cage. He can be defined as the father of modern music. I'll switch to my interests again. I am interested in the chronology of music, the way this domain of art has been transforming, what are its origins and what changed during the years. I am happy that music created so long ago, even centuries, is still alive.

In my opinion, there's place for KW among the names you have mentioned. • Without KW today's music would be different, less interesting. Which contemporary musicians do you especially appreciate? Who's worth listening to?

Above all – Karlheinz Stockhausen. The moment I met him was a great experience for me. It was some years ago in Stockholm at the Polar Music Prize celebration. We spent two days in Stockholm, having coffee conversations. It's a great artist.

What music do you listen to at home? Your own or other artists'?

Mostly I listen to the music I had produced. You know how it is when you have your own studio in the basement. When I create music, it may take me as long as three months. So I listen to the same music since I get up and have my breakfast. I start hearing what needs more work, I change the sounds, the rhythm, until the entire composition sounds correctly. I really enjoy classical music, for example „Matthäus Passion“ from Johann Sebastian Bach. I often go to concerts and listen to musical plays. Contemporary music made by other artists is a rare guest in my house, unlike classical music, which I listen to frequently.

Do you know any Polish musicians?

No, unfortunately.

Did you have a chance to listen to any of them performing in Plock (original in polish: PŁOCK)?

How did you spell it? Puock?

**Plock. P-£-O-C-K**

Puock, Puock, Plock. A very interesting name indeed. Sounds like an onomatopoeia: plok, plok, plok. I like it [Karl spent a while improvising with the sound of city's name].

**Plok. Like a Boing Boom Tschak. Boing Boom Tschak Plok. • Let's go back to the question: Did you have a chance to listen to other musicians in Plock? How do sense FeMEV festival?**

No, so far I haven't heard anyone. I came yesterday and was too tired to come to the stage from my hotel. But my mates were here, you can ask them about their impressions. Maybe I will be able to listen for a while, but we're really short on time.

**Let's go back into the past. Which KW album do you like most? Which track?**

It's a difficult question, I can't answer it easily. I think these would be Die Mensch Maschine and Computerwelt. The track? Even more difficult. Maybe the popular ones? Computerwelt, Das Modell, Der Telefon Anruf. I will play them today for Plock audience.

**Another question concerning your KW years. On 1<sup>st</sup> August 1978 divided into two teams you promoted "Die Mensch Maschine" longplay, accompanied by robots for the first time. Where did the idea come from?**

That's a fact. At that time we had such robots already, perfectly crafted by the Japanese. We were intrigued by anthropomorphisation, humanification of the machines. That was very innovative at that time, thus very exciting. Today it's a common idea. Modern machines became usual, they surround us.

**When can we expect new Karl Bartos release?**

"The Camera" remix will be released soon on my AudioVision label. And I still work on further material.

**What does "Electronic Lifestyle" [description used for KW works] and Esperanto & Communication [names of Bartos' albums] mean to you?**

Electronic Lifestyle was an idiom created by a journalist writing about KW in the 70s. At that time the music was overwhelmed by technology. Somebody imagined our lives that way. I have to refer to websites to check how this name is understood and used today. Remember that our impression of music changes the same as does modern technology. Technology affects the way we think and behave, defines how the societies thrive. • Esperanto? Communication? Esperanto is an introduction to general communication, global understanding, a language accessible to everyone. Such a communication is not always possible. Once I was in South America where no one spoke English. But somehow we communicated. Now we are talking in German, which I think never happened to me while being interviewed outside Germany. It was always English. I am happy to talk to you in German. The fact that you speak so well in a foreign language improves our communication. And in the context of art, music is not speech but pure form and mathematics, on its way from the artist to the listener. It is important what is created in artist's mind and what remains in listener's heart. Music is a form of global communication, an esperanto.

You might think that a 53-year-old performing in front of an audience born mainly after Bartos' songs topped the charts would at its most turn into an "ancient sound museum visit". However, the German lifted the audience to the stars, in spite of chilly August night. The first sounds of Karl's synthesizers accompanied by Mathias Black and René Junge made the listeners forget about the cold and concert delay. Bartos fit into their expectations seamlessly. Knowing the persistence of his ex-KW image, he willingly played a bunch of greatest hits of this legendary group, enriched with his solo works from Communication. Bartos played The Camera, I'm The Message, 15 Minutes of Fame, Ultraviolet and many more. Bartos played a pleasant, carefully mastered and perfectly sounding music. Not trying to imitate current KW style, he shifted towards sentimental journey to old-school KW sound. His arrangement tricks and compositions prove that his departure wasn't good for KW. I'm a fan of KW. I'm a fan of Karl Bartos.

**Translate: Michal Zelazowski**