



SURVIVAL KIT

INTERVIEW WITH SERGE TEYSSOT-GAY

What is this hostile environment in which the survival kit you're offering would be useful?

Serge Teyssot-Gay: It's the world. A free zone can only exist if we create it within a hostile environment we cannot escape. You can find ways to survive there. And for me, it means playing, inventing, with whoever I want, whenever I want; it's coming up with musical forms and formations that I like. The *Zone libre* (*Free Zone*) project I created with Cyril Bilbeaud, and which served as the basis for *Survival Kit*, takes the same form as most of my creations: a duo. My projects are often born from the admiration I feel for certain people, to whom I offer to work together through a system of exchange.

Are you saying that you only need two people to open a free zone?

Exactly. The name *Interzone*, my first project with Khaled Al Jharamani, was the original title of William Burroughs' beautiful *Naked Lunch*. I go in the opposite direction of what he described, a lawless area full of surveillance cameras and watchtowers. I try to open rifts, interstices in which we can hide to create. That's where *Interzone* was born, which was followed by *Zone libre*, then by *Zone PolyUrbaine*, and today by *Survival Kit*. I work in duos because I've found that form to produce an emotional truth, a trust that protects from confusion, but also from renouncement. If one stops talking or the other stops listening, there's no conversation anymore.

For *Survival Kit*, your group has become a sextet. Does that change the modalities of that dialogue?

Not really. The music remains that of a duo, and the other musicians are guests, who by the way also come as pairs—two wind instruments, two voices. We invited them very simply; our relationship is based on trust, and they are entirely free to propose whatever they want. Every one of us finds his place until he's comfortable, but without impinging on someone else's specialty. In life like in music, you should leave others alone. We have beautiful words for this evidence, like "the respect of others" or "the respect of differences," but it's important to actually know not to impinge on others. There's a shared zone, but there are other zones that aren't. Because we're fundamentally different. Which is a good thing. I'm against mind-numbing concepts like "we're all the same," or "let's erase differences." It's destructive, because it's dumb. A surface-level tolerance that aims to erase people's particularities scares me way more than an open enemy. The best-case scenario is when we're all very different, and we all respect our differences. That's how new forms are created. That's what I'm interested in. So you have to choose different, unique artists who can form bonds through emulation. When I invited them, Mike Ladd and Marc Nammour didn't know each other. Of course, I knew them, but separately. I had an intuition that something could happen, that they could meet over the themes they care about, based on my conception of music, on my way of working. Similarly, when I asked Médéric Collignon and Akosh Szelevényi to join us, I picked two musicians I know well and like, who don't know each other, but between whom I think there'll be a certain alchemy. I seem not to have been mistaken. I'm very happy.

Did you really give no instruction to the other members of the sextet?

I only gave them a principle. Often in concerts—and in the performing arts in general—popular wisdom says that the voice should be at the centre, but I told them right away that that wouldn't be the case here. Médéric Collignon obviously has as much importance and reach as Mike Ladd or Marc Nammour. Similarly, if I hear a saxophone, I know right away if Akosh Szelevényi is the one playing it. Cyril Bilbeaud only has to play a couple patterns for me to know it's him. They are voices. They all invented a language with their respective instruments. Their power is at least as strong as that of spoken words, of meaning. Music is a means of expression, which communicates intentions and thoughts. To Marc and Mike, I explained what I see as the creative energy that are the peripheries. They are cities that are always starting over. People from all over the world go back and forth there, and they exchange, formally or informally. This bubbling can't but create new ideas and propositions. Marc, Mike, and I have similar preoccupations, care about similar themes. I express them through music, they express them through words, but we all start on the periphery of cities, which is the same in Pikine, Saint-Denis, or Brooklyn. The imagination and poetry of all the peripheries of the world weave harmonies and connections. We question the

fact that the world is the huge periphery of the financial sector that rules it and of the petrochemical and weapons industries that decide for it, to the point that they can oversee famines in order to encourage speculation... Meanwhile, people who live on the periphery actually represent most of the world's population.

Is the idea of periphery not limited to its geographical meaning for you?

Absolutely. We're all on the periphery of that domination. *Survival Kit* explores the attempts we all make to continue living on the periphery of financial powers, in spite of their sprawling presence. Laws are supposedly decided by States, but the private system now supersedes its public counterpart. States are dependent on financiers, they always have been, but it's more and more the case, and in a less and less clear fashion. States now function like companies, and vice-versa. It's becoming impossible to figure out who's responsible for what. At worst, we adapt to that new reality—which implies a terrible form of voluntary servitude, a freedom bought, allowed, and defined by those in power, and thus devoid of meaning. At best, we create. That's the option we chose for *Survival Kit*. Through poetry, that is to say, invention, arises a surprising answer to what has been imposed on us: a *proposition*.

How does such a rich and complex thought get transcribe into music? Can the guitar transmit a thought?

Through music, we can at least hear a singular proposition. We can recognise the research that founds it, a way of thinking, a path. What I create has no name but is aimed at an elsewhere I cannot describe, since I'm forever looking for it. It's that will itself that can be heard through the notes and which connects with what I'm saying with words right now. Music itself can escape norms, of which she is one of the favourite targets. In any bar or restaurant, we're constantly assaulted by standardised and standardising music, same at the grocery store, in public places, in elevators, in vehicles, through ringtones, through the radio, through television. I'm constantly struggling not to let it influence me. You can't close your ears like you can close your eyes. So against the invasion of that music made to worm its way into your head, I have first to protect myself, then to focus on abnormal forms. Commercial music colonises the brains of musical programmers and musicians, who believe they're adopting a mood that's being offered when they're actually putting themselves in a box. Diversity dies and, with it, potentially new ideas. Movement is essential. If you don't move, you can't feel your chains.

You're often the leader of the projects you take part in. Do you like to lead the way?

My work is very structured. I have my own label, I compose, I play. I have a clear idea of what I'm going for, so I often ask others to trust me. Once we've decided to work together, there's a great freedom. We can't fight the mechanisms we're denouncing by reproducing them within a microsystem. My work at the label has allowed me to learn about how companies work, the rules that apply to creation rights, image rights, diffusion rights. I've become kind of an expert because I'm interested in all those elements, they feed my reflections. Small details lead to more general conceptions. I don't have this tendency to close myself off from what bothers me. Poetry and creation aren't a way to escape the world; they're the opposite. You'll always express something you know better. I don't like preconceptions, and I don't like the idea of being against everything. It's an attitude that makes sense when you're a teenager, but after that, it's the accumulation of knowledge that allows you to build your position, your own system of thought, your personality.

Interview conducted by Marion Canelas

Translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

