

# XPACT II



FMRC D 601



**Stefan Keune** — *tenor sax*

**Erhard Hirt** — *guitar & electronics*

**Hans Schneider** — *double bass*

**Paul Lytton** — *Trobriander laptop + miscellaneous table top objects*

This freight train phrase describes an object of study that's been woefully under-attended relative to its counterparts in London, Amsterdam, and New York. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, across Germany, especially in the north, with outposts in smaller cities like Aachen, Witten, Wuppertal, Leverkusen, and Wiesbaden, musicians gathered as workshops, cooperatives, and collectives, presenting themselves in festivals, projects, or "meetings," following the example set out by Jost Gebers and Peter Brötzmann's Berlin-centered first wave free music organization, Free Music Production (FMP), away from which these regionally diffuse platforms pushed. The scenes cross-pollinated, germinated, grew into their own particular musical ecosystems. Some amalgamations were fleeting; others were longer lasting. A few jelled into bona fide bands.

XPACT was one of the strongest of the second gen German free music working bands. A quartet, XPACT took shape in M.A.I. Orchestra, a large improvising ensemble founded in Witten by pianist Martin Theurer, which included all four members. Guitarist Erhard Hirt and bassist Hans Schneider were both from Leverkusen and had been working together since their late teens. Schneider was part of a trio with saxophonist and clarinetist Wolfgang Fuchs; the group recorded an LP for FMP in 1979. Hirt led a quartet with Fuchs, Schneider, and drummer Jochen Twelker at the Moers Music Festival the same year. In 1981, Paul Lovens introduced Hirt to British ex-patriot percussionist Paul Lytton. (Lytton is technically a first generation improviser, having come of age in the London jazz scene of the mid 1960s.) Hirt and Lytton recorded never-issued duets before teaming up in 1982 with Fuchs and Schneider. And XPACT was born.

This foursome was the core of another classic group of the scene, King Übü Orchestrü, which, unlike M.A.I., was international in scope, incorporating non-German members from Switzerland, Austria, the U.K., and Italy. After a short stint as a collective, Fuchs and Hirt assumed leadership of Übü; the dispute between them that led to Hirt leaving the large group in 1986 also precipitated the disbanding of XPACT. During its four-year run, XPACT played together extensively, developing a unique approach to small group interplay documented in synopsis on their lone LP, Frogman's View, released on the FMP subsidiary Uhlklang.

Fast-forward 34 years. XPACT reboots in a different world. Tragically, Fuchs died of a heart attack in 2016. In his place, Stefan Keune brings his own less oblique sensibility, portaging some of the tongue-centric vocabulary of his predecessor, adding fulsome tonal directness, identifying a clear position amid the old comrades, who fall together like dear friends around a table, estranged for forgotten reasons, reunited to see if there's spark left. There's more than a spark here. This is spectacularly sharp improvising. It is purely organic, elementally sonic, reveling in crunchy timbre and texture, building on the productive confusion of electronic and acoustic pitches and noises. I'm reminded why I was riveted to /Frogman's View/ back in the day – Schneider's sparkling arco, Hirt's versatility and quickness, Lytton's warmth, musicality, and humor. The richest spoils of this music are found in the band's interaction. There, in sudden changes of direction or unexpected protractions, you can hear how, against all odds, all members having grown and changed over the years, XPACT is somehow still XPACT.

John Corbett, Chicago, November 2020