

## **AG Geige: Ein Amateurfilm**

**Carsten Gebhardt (Director)**

Raster-Noton DVD 2012, 80 mins

Technological advancement was a serious concern under socialism. It was perceived to be a vital tool in the Cold War struggle. But the East German Socialist Party's anxieties about their failure to compete with the West are confirmed by the group AG Geige, who recall how difficult it was to make electronic music in the late socialist era. Formed in 1986 in Karl-Marx-Stadt (now Chemnitz), their name itself, which translates as Work Group Violin, was a joke about such difficulties, alluding to the musical activities traditionally offered to workers. But against all technical odds, their combination of flamboyant self-made costumes, rickety synthesizers and cobbled-together drums made the group look like dancers from the Bauhaus designed *Triadic Ballet* or performers from a Mozart operetta slumming it at Hugo Ball's Cabaret Voltaire to declaim

dadaist lyrics. In Carsten Gebhardt's documentary, AG Geige's members – including Frank Bretschneider and Olaf Bender, who later cofounded Raster-Noton with fellow Karl-Marx-Stadt native Carsten Nicolai – don't call their assemblage performance art, but a "multimedia show".

The documentary is made in a staid talking heads format, but the concert and video clips provide good value. Highlighting their playful creativity and impure aesthetics, these clips show the group at their best. In the video for "Zeychen Und Wundern", they mix communist symbols such as the handshake on DDR insignia with Olympic circles, the Star of David and a kitschy red heart. Otherwise the film is devoid of any dissident viewpoints about "the system". Instead it focuses on the matter-of-fact minutiae of making music in straitened circumstances. That isn't to say that state oppression isn't dealt with. The film includes tales that touch

on the absurdities of socialist life, such as having to be certified as masters of music by the local Party branch. AG Geige's failure to impress their comrades led to the cancellation of a gig in West Berlin. Interviewed for the film, the group speak with a modesty that doesn't make for thrilling footage, although it does express an endearing work ethic. With nothing to be gained by being in AG Geige, certainly not a career, music is a matter of dedication.

Maybe the amateurism underlined by the film's subtitle explains the odd timelessness of the group. They might have been born too late and then in the wrong Germany to participate in the Neue Deutsche Welle, but they paradoxically appear to be ahead of their time in their use of 1970s synthesizers. If this made them look dated to Westerners, today they appear very retro. Either way, they existed in their own world. You can hear the influence of Der Plan in AG Geige's music, particularly the cryptic, funny

miniatures of the Dusseldorf group's 1980 album *Gerig Reig*; AG Geige also shared Der Plan's weakness for costumes. But, for all their referencing of interwar German culture, AG Geige were not so much about repeating avant garde gestures as embarking on their own instinctive experimentation. There's a fair bit of infantilism in their work – deadpan lyrics about psychedelic rabbits and electronic bananas, and so on. But perhaps their silliness represented the absurdity of the late DDR better than more openly polemical lyrics. Although less prone to making political gestures than their Russian counterparts, AG Geige's music also recalls the eccentricities of the late 1980s Leningrad art music scene, which produced such unique projects as Sergey Kuryokhin's concept orchestra Pop-Mechanika. Both groups are a reminder of the creative possibilities to be found in limited resources.  
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