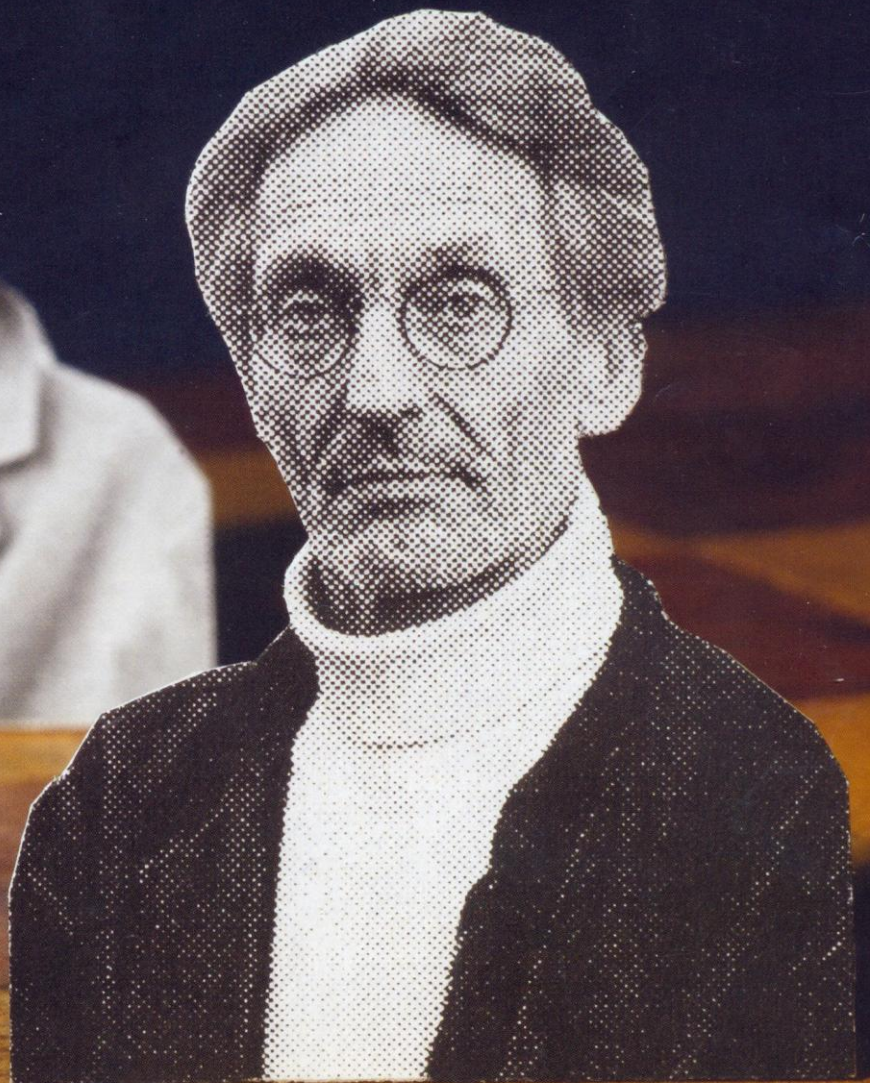


WIRE

MANUEL
GÖTTSCHING

The story of *E2-E4*



Turkish psychedelia
Grouper
Sandwell District
Spinn & Rashad

André Vida
Roger Reynolds

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PLAY ING THE LONG

vening of 12 December 1981. Manuel Göttsching enters his Berlin studio and boots up his synths, sequencers and drum machines. The following day he is flying to Hamburg and wants to record some music to play on his Walkman – an hour's worth should be enough. He's been working with this analogue electronic gear for half a decade, so setting up patches is second nature to him now. After a few adjustments, he plugs in his guitar, just in case he feels like sprinkling a little of that famous Göttsching fairy dust on the music at some point. Sequencers are primed and pulsing. All that's left to do is choose a couple of chords on the polysynth. Press record. Let it go. Let it flow. Let it play.

59 minutes and 20 seconds later, *E2–E4* is complete.

"There are some good moments in life when you produce something and you don't notice it at the time," Göttsching tells me 30 years on. "That comes later. Maybe years later."

On its 30th anniversary, *E2–E4* remains, in its own unassuming way, one of the most revolutionary and important albums ever made. It swings between those two beautifully suspended chords for its entire duration, yet this never feels like a confrontation or a challenge. Neither is it tedious; the apparent stasis of the surface of the music invites the listener to look beneath and discover the detail teeming below, as well as recalibrating their sensitivity to dynamics and musical transformation as the piece progresses. Gently but insistently, it forces you to engage with it on its own terms. That's not to claim that *E2–E4* was unprecedented. Brian Eno was doing something similar to the way we hear things with his Ambient releases, and of course we can go back through Eliane Radigue and La Monte Young for earlier radical re-imaginings of the relationship between sound and duration. But in comparison Göttsching's album is warm, approachable and often startlingly melodic. Perhaps most importantly of all in terms

of understanding why its influence has proved so enduring, you can dance to it.

Before becoming one of the select few 'godfathers of Techno' along with various peers from the so-called 'Berlin School' of electronic musicians who emerged in the 70s, Manuel Göttsching was the ultimate Kosmische guitar hero, responsible for some of the greatest moments of German experimental rock of that decade. Had he retired after the first Ash Ra Tempel album (recorded with Hartmut Enke and Klaus Schulze), his legendary status would still be assured. He took the idea of the power trio and, though initially inspired by their example, gradually established a new model far removed from that of the British and American combos. One reason for the adventurousness of the group and many of its peers was their openness to experimental music and art. "Ash Ra Tempel was basically improvisation," he says. "There was a studio in Berlin run by the

Three decades ago, Ash Ra Tempel grandmaster **Manuel Göttsching**

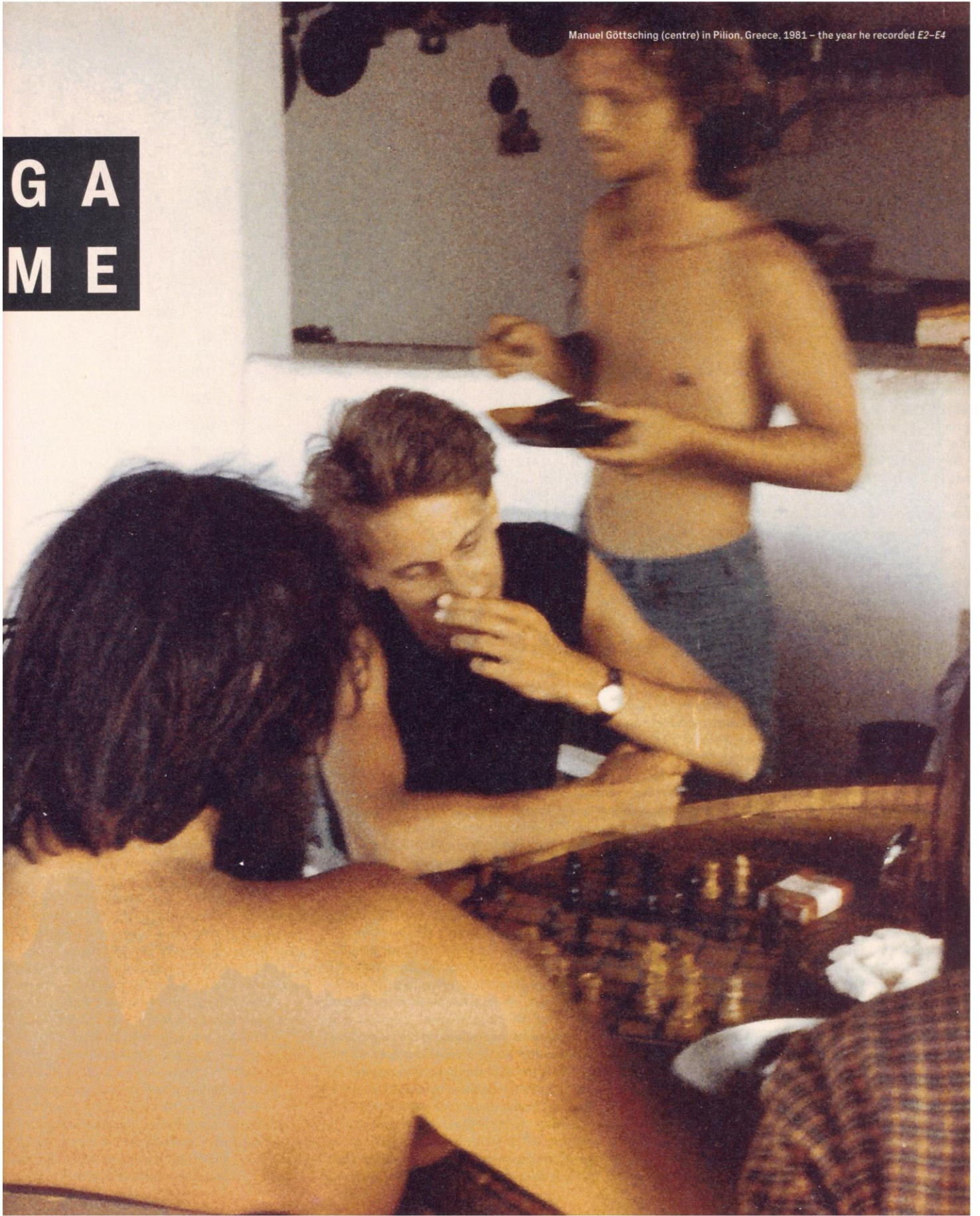
made his opening move with the pioneering electro-minimalism of *E2–E4* and reset the pace for a new age of repetitive dance beats and rock meditations.

By **Keith Moliné**.

Photography by **Kai von Rabenau**

Manuel Göttsching (centre) in Pilion, Greece, 1981 – the year he recorded E2-E4

**G A
M E**



Swiss composer Thomas Kessler where many German groups and musicians would meet. It was a kind of rehearsal studio and he was our teacher for two years. He taught us basic elements of composing and improvisation. I also listened to beat music in the 60s on the radio and I was interested in how they made this music, how they got this sound. At the beginning I was interested in all those blues guitarists like Clapton, Mick Taylor, Peter Green and Hendrix of course. I was also fascinated by their concerts, Cream or Jimi Hendrix concerts, when they started to improvise, really long improvisations. That was basically the style we took on in Ash Ra Tempel. We took the blues theme only at the beginning, and at the end we threw it away and only used the improvisation!"

Certainly much of the music Götttsching created in this era was about as outré as rock music gets before it ceases to be rock. Or even music. (Yet his guitar playing, even when it is deployed as stealthily as on *E2–E4*, is undeniably informed by blues styles.) A more important connection is the way the music evolves according to its own slow-mo logic, both improvisatory and hallucinatory. Ash Ra Tempel at their best showcased Götttsching the collective improviser; his later work with electronics represents the same ideology applied to machines. "That's very important, the interplay," he confirms. "Really playing with sequences or loops, improvising with them, that's very important for all my music, especially *E2–E4*. I found out very soon that if you use a sequencer you have to play with it, you have to change notes, change sounds, you really have to play it as an instrument."

Many of those aware of Götttsching favour those early albums, the received wisdom being that he 'lost it' creatively in the mid-70s and sold out to a more commercially viable New Age aesthetic. In this context *E2–E4* is likely to be seen as a lucky one-off that momentarily saw him recover his artistic dignity. It might well be difficult to challenge the view that his interim work scaled neither the heights of his earlier music nor those of *E2–E4*, but a case can be made that this period deserves to be reassessed, if only to scotch the notion that the album was a freak accident, a bolt out of the blue. The upheavals in Ash Ra Tempel, the chaos of their involvement with visionary Kosmische hustler Rolf-Ulrich Kaiser and the Timothy Leary entourage, the breakdown of Götttsching's close friend Hartmut Enke, all go some way to explaining why he started working solo, and why his music changed accordingly. (Intriguingly, a documentary charting the turbulent events of the *Seven Up* sessions with Leary is being planned by Götttsching's wife, film director Ilona Ziok.)

More positively, this mid-70s period was when the music of the New York minimalists came to his attention. "I was influenced by Terry Riley and Steve Reich," he recalls. "Riley could play sequences on the piano for hours. I was really fascinated by that. When I studied in the Berlin studio with Thomas Kessler I learned about the contemporary avant garde composers like Penderecki, I listened to Stockhausen and Ligeti, but I didn't find any real access to this

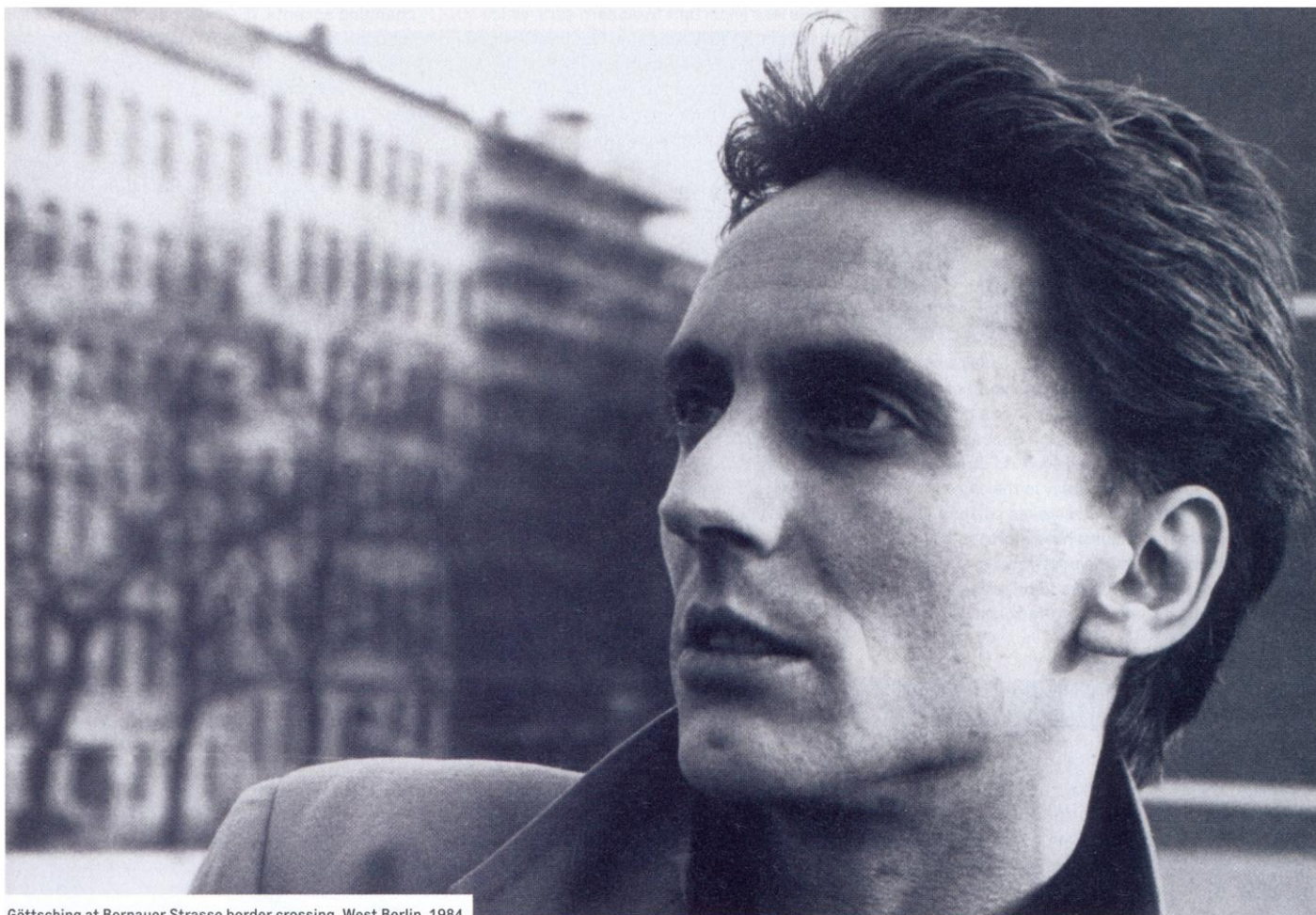
music, it was too much brain and not enough body. For me music has to make an atmosphere somehow. You don't have to understand it, just listen to it, it has to give you something. I always miss this in that very academic, mathematical style. I have great respect for them, but I was very happy when later in the 70s Reich and Philip Glass appeared, and they had a combination of both. It was an intellectual music if you wanted it. You could listen to it, in the background if you like, and you didn't have to understand it or know anything about music. But if you wanted to go deeper into the music there was something more. That was an aesthetic that I liked. So that's what I tried to do with my own music."

Götttsching's first forays into systems based music centred on echo effects and guitar, allowing him to create music that sounded synthesized, sequenced and looped despite making no use of synths, sequencers or loops. Nevertheless, 1975's *Inventions For Electric Guitar* anticipates the electronic textures that were soon to dominate his work, and its pulsing 16th-note ostinatos prefigure the mesmeric grooves of *E2–E4*. His move towards a synth-dominated approach seems not just logical, but inevitable. "On *Inventions For Electric Guitar* I tried to get more interesting sounds out of a guitar. Some of the sounds were so difficult to make that I could never do it onstage. I come from classical guitar playing, but I also had a taste for technical things. My father was an engineer and an inventor, so I was always interested in electronic sounds and other sounds."

I ask him if the transition was an easy one. "I just found it natural," he insists. "And I found out that I started to compose in a different way when I played a keyboard. It inspires you in a different way, different melodies, different chords." The albums he made at this time – *New Age Of Earth* and *Blackouts* – were released under the name Ashra, and were his most melodic and accessible records yet. As with the late 70s work of electronic contemporaries Klaus Schulze and Tangerine Dream, these decidedly mainstream offerings had been out of favour for years – decades, even – before the rehabilitation of some of their stylistic tropes by the current crop of analogue fetishists, Hypnagogic explorers and post-Noise sequencer demons. Even the garish album artwork has started to look strangely modern. In any case, there are some fine compositions on the albums, which document Götttsching's ever increasing fluency in his new idiom, and which give the lie to any suggestion that *E2–E4* was an unprecedented departure for him. But be warned: subsequent Ashra albums might prove more resistant to any similar attempt at redemption.

Not only was his confidence growing in the studio, but also he was starting to give occasional live electronic performances, often accompanying large fashion events. Indeed, from the very start of his career Götttsching's recorded work in various styles is characterised by the sense that you are hearing a performance unfold in linear fashion. "This is for me the essence of making music – to play," he asserts. "I was very anxious about the production in the studio

"First oscillator, second oscillator, changing envelopes... start with one instrument, then go to the second, then the third... always interacting"



Göttsching at Bernauer Strasse border crossing, West Berlin, 1984

of the first Ash Ra Tempel album in 1971. I wanted to keep it as much as possible like our live concerts. But *E2-E4* didn't come out of the blue. It was several years of preparation really. I built my studio in 1974. And I'd got used to playing live for 70 or 80 minutes with synthesizers, sequencers, keyboards. It's like learning an instrument. My instrument was my studio, several analogue synthesizers, drum machines, keyboards, the mixing desk, all working together as one big instrument."

So when Göttsching entered his studio that December evening in 1981, he was ready. "In 1981 I was working on a new solo album, and my plan was to make a big composition," he says, taking up the story. "I'd increased all my equipment and I wanted to make a more synthesized, orchestral composition. So I worked on this piece and that piece but I couldn't really get into it or finish it. Then I just played for one hour and I had a beautiful piece. Very little preparation. First oscillator, second oscillator, changing envelopes. It's very quickly done, just ten minutes. Start with one instrument, then go to the second, then the third, back to the first, change it a little bit, start with something else, go back, always interacting. About eight instruments at the same time. I started with the two chords, with a sequencer controlling the volume of each of the steps, and that makes the shifting

accents that go through the piece. I don't change the chords, I change the accents. One hour, just once, and finito. Finished. It was a fantastic moment."

Nevertheless, the importance of what he'd recorded was not immediately apparent. Along with a sense of achievement, there were nagging doubts. In 1981 what format could accommodate an unbroken hour-long piece? Where did all this leave his solo album? Göttsching confesses to a feeling of mild irritation about the ease with which he'd made the piece in comparison with his unfinished project. Despite the slight tone of bravado that his description of its genesis might suggest, he's happy to admit that it didn't always work out this well. "I made so many sessions that were terrible and nothing happened," he reveals. "Some days it just doesn't work. Sometimes it works beautifully. There's no guarantee." The new recording, however, was flawless, unimpeachable, but also irreducible. It took him two years to make the decision to release it; the album eventually came out in 1984, to initially muted response, housed in its famous chessboard sleeve reflecting the fact that the futuristic title actually refers to the most common opening move in chess.

After the three year gap between its recording and its release, it was a further five years before the piece

started to seep into public consciousness as the unlikeliest of club anthems. In 1981, the relaxed lope of its muted machine rhythm was a million miles from the bombastic brashness of most dance music of its time, but in the wake of the similarly subtle shades of Chicago House and Detroit Techno towards the end of the decade, it suddenly sounded contemporary.

Like this writer, many will have first been exposed to *E2-E4* via the 1989 House anthem "Sueño Latino" by the Italian outfit of the same name, which relied almost entirely on a sample from Göttsching's original composition, and subsequent remixes by Derrick May and Carl Craig. That pulsing two-chord figure was one of Techno's signature calls to the floor. Even in the Techno versus House wars of the early 90s, *E2-E4* displayed its almost Zelig-like ability to blend in with any style. It was lush enough to provide the material for Sueño Latino's tropical House, sharp enough for Craig and May's Detroit Techno ice sculpting. Over the next two decades, it continued to be plundered for inspiration by numerous dance producers as superior chill-out fodder, not always with the blessing of Göttsching himself, though he recognises that the work's rebirth as a Techno primary text is one of the main reasons for its longevity. "At first it wasn't a big hit," he says. "It didn't sell very much, it was released on a small label and then I continued to distribute it.

Then I heard it was being played in clubs in New York.”

As armchair variants on Techno emerged in the 90s, the piece found yet another community of sympathetic listeners. Carl Craig’s 1992 “Remake” under his Paperclip People alias was itself memorably versioned by Basic Channel as “E2–E4 Basic Reshape” in 1994. Rather than paying homage to *E2–E4*’s chilled-out chordal vamp and beats that uncannily anticipate House and Techno by the best part of a decade, the “Basic Reshape” instead concentrates on yet another of its facets: how it presages the way that radical forms of Minimal Techno play games with the listener’s perception of time through its slow-motion shifts of tone over its long duration. It’s this aspect that has ensured the piece’s reputation as a key piece of experimental electronic music, rather than simply a weird slab of proto-Techno prescience. It’s another example of how *E2–E4* seems to renew itself as time passes, styles change, new musical approaches are essayed and older ones revisited. As evolving strains of Minimal Techno and House hold sway in the clubs, its sleek, straightforward momentum makes perfect sense. As Ambient and drone music have increased in popularity (even ubiquity) in the post-Techno era, so Götttsching’s album continues to be seen as a touchstone. While its salient feature seemed

initially to be its monolithic, unchanging quality, that aspect feels less important to modern ears, which can perhaps more easily tune in to its subtle timbral changes. In short, *E2–E4* just doesn’t sound like it used to.

E2–E4 remains a thorough exploration of the power of minimalism in a popular music context. There’s a brazen quality to its repetition. When the guitar enters after half an hour, it might be expected to herald a major shift of some kind, but it’s almost as if the piece has scrolled back to the beginning and is unfolding once again as nothing more than a readymade backdrop to Götttsching’s solo. Which itself is not really a solo; this is not one of his trademark searing leads, but a subtly probing, highly rhythmic series of lines and licks. There’s never one obvious point of focus in *E2–E4*. The gradual opening of a filter is no more or less important than the guitar line. It’s spectacularly undemonstrative music. The listener is at once forced into a heightened state of sensitivity to the detail of the moment, and an awareness of the shape of the piece as it slowly, unfussily develops.

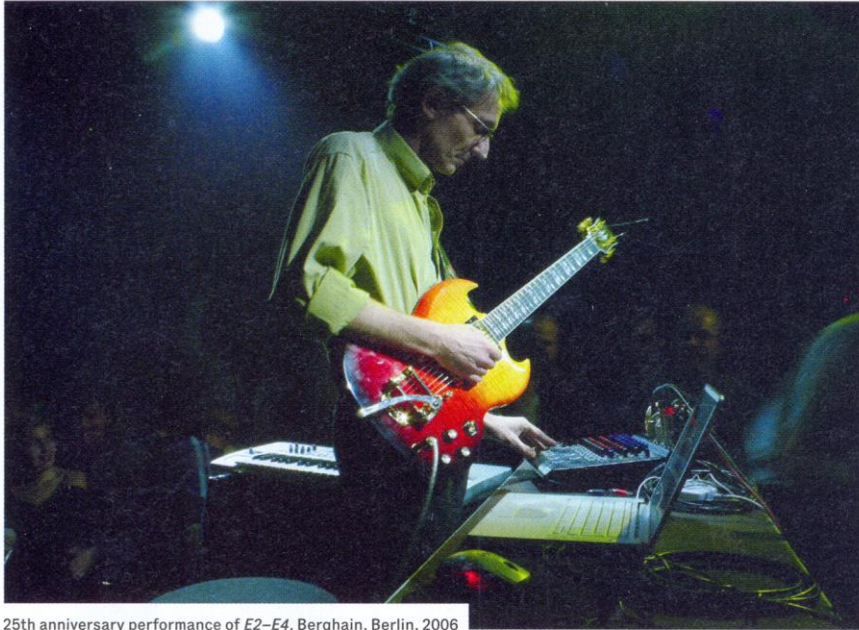
Götttsching is diffident when trying to pinpoint the piece’s enduring appeal. “I think it’s because it’s

very simple,” he says. “It’s based on two chords with changing accents. It’s a very floating piece of music that changes very little. There’s much that’s left open, it’s not over-produced, you can let it run and just listen to it in the background, you can dance to it, you can follow it note by note, there are many possibilities to listen to it.” Indeed, it’s the functional aspect of the piece, the way that its blankness just begs the listener actively to use it rather than just experience it, that makes it so unique. “I once was asked what’s your favourite album when you’re in bed, when you’re on a plane, when you’re in your car,” he recalls. “I thought about it, and every answer for me was *E2–E4*. It fits in every situation!”

And it’s a living composition. While it seems to be quite capable of continually renewing itself, since 2005 Götttsching has been performing live versions of *E2–E4* to great acclaim. The monastic calm of the original, having already been transformed in the Techno era into an anthem of collective euphoria, becomes something else again when performed by its creator to an attentive audience. First came an acoustic interpretation by the Zeitkratzer ensemble, with Götttsching guesting on acoustic guitar, which was released on CD on his own MG.ART label. “They’re a fantastic ensemble,” he enthuses. “They



In Berlin, October 2011



25th anniversary performance of *E2-E4*, Berghain, Berlin, 2006

“I
once
was
asked
what’s
your
favourite
album
when
you’re
in
bed,
on
a
plane,
in
a
car.
Every
answer
was
E2-E4!”

take hints from the original composition and really start improvising with it. They showed that you can transform music that was originally composed for electronic instruments, and you can play it with a classical ensemble.”

The following year (2006) he performed the piece electronically for the first time since 1981 at the Metamorphose Festival in Japan, where he is something of an icon (thanks in part to the support of noted businessman Gen Fujita, a Krautrock nut in whose Tokyo Tower Wax Museum lurks the figure of Göttsching alongside Abraham Lincoln, Marilyn Monroe and Brad Pitt). Happily, a DVD of the concert is available on MG.ART. Göttsching gives a fabulous reading, cleverly incorporating and manipulating string and horn samples that one assumes are sourced from the Zeitkratzer session, playing with the sequences via his laptop and spinning out some beautifully gossamer guitar lines. The piece is transplanted from the private realm of the studio onto the stage without sacrificing the unique character of the composition. “That’s what I tried to do,” he confirms. “I rebuilt the piece completely with new elements and then I mixed it with original parts because I wanted to keep the atmosphere. At first I thought it would be impossible to perform because I couldn’t bring my whole studio to places to replay it. It took 20 years for the computer to be developed enough, to be reliable enough to use on stage and [have] the possibility to really play it live, to give it a life, feeling.” He performed it in the Berghain superclub in Berlin later that year, on the exact day of its 25th anniversary, and further performances followed in 2008 in Beijing and New York.

More *E2-E4*-related projects are in the pipeline. A mini-festival is being planned for 2012 in London, where *E2-E4* will have its British debut. Also, documentary film maker Alexander Snelling is keen to make a film about the creation of the album, and even more intriguingly, a concert version is being prepared



Marilyn Monroe, Göttsching, Brad Pitt and Abraham Lincoln in the entrance of Tokyo Tower Wax Museum

by the NDR Big Band, the jazz orchestra of the North German equivalent of the BBC.

What the original *E2-E4* represented was a return to the spontaneity of Ash Ra Tempel, a move away from the denser electronic instrumentals that he was getting bogged down in as Ashra on albums like *Correlations* (1979) and *Belle Alliance* (1980). It also showed the value of stretching out, in contrast to the tense atmosphere of his contemporaneous work, which seemed compromised by an insistence on putting themes across succinctly so that more room could be made to pile on more ideas. “That’s always a danger, to overproduce something,” he agrees. “On some parts of *Correlations* we tried to do a little too much. You think you have to do more, to add something here, do something here, to make it more attractive or understandable. We released a three CD set called *The Making Of...* with the original improvisations, how it all started. You hear the energy, the power, the joy of playing, which was what originally brought us together, to play, to perform. But then we produced it for nearly a year.” It comes down to a question of balance, between experimentation and accessibility, softness and abrasiveness, restraint and attack, pulse and drift. And that old chestnut, composition and improvisation.

“There are various ways to make music; what counts is the result,” says Göttsching simply. While he is keen to extend his repertoire of compositional techniques in future work, inspired particularly by his encounter with Zeitkratzer and his experiences in scoring films, he still understands the value of spontaneity – after all, that’s what lies behind the success of *E2-E4*. Ultimately, he sees both approaches as equally viable strategic choices. “It’s something you decide before you start playing. You can start with the idea of a theme, and then use another one and then another one. Or you can just let it go. Let it flow. Let it play.” □ *E2-E4* Deluxe Edition CD and *E2-E4 Live In Japan* DVD are available on MG.ART. ashra.com

Ash Ra Tempel and after Keith Moliné surveys Manuel Göttsching on record



Ash Ra Tempel's self-titled 1971 debut album is an enduring Kosmische classic. Over two side-long tracks, the trio – Göttsching on guitar, Hartmut Enke on bass, Klaus Schulze on drums – not only manage to avoid sounding like the Cream-inspired power trio they'd set out to be, but rarely sound like human beings at all. Swathed in massive reverb, Göttsching's glissando guitar spills out ectoplasmically over the pummeling tribal attack of the most fluid of rhythm sections. At times on the more energised "Amboss" the echo is reined in for a moment and an earthier, bluesier approach can be glimpsed, but "Traumaschine" treats the instruments as if they're components in a piece of musique concrète, blurring them into one huge echo-drenched wall of sensual sound.

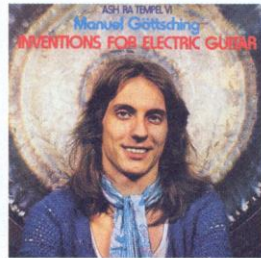
For the second Ash Ra Tempel album *Schwingungen*, recorded in 1972 with Wolfgang Müller on drums and featuring the acid-fried vocal ululations of John L. Göttsching had some compositions sketched out beforehand. Not that you'd know: it sounds almost as freeform as its predecessor, though the group – and they sound more like a group here than a hovering cloud of cosmic gas – don't quite scale the same heights of crazed invention. The title track's final section, "Liebe", centres on a hymn-like sequence that strongly recalls the coda to Pink Floyd's "A Saucerful Of Secrets", and Göttsching's guitar has an undeniably Gilmour-esque cosmic blues keen to it.

1973's *Seven Up*, recorded in Switzerland with psychedelic gurus-in-exile Timothy Leary and Brian Barritt with a host of musical and countercultural heavy friends, is probably more interesting as a historical document than a listening experience. "Space" is a chaotic suite of garage riffs and faintly moronic vocal posturing, redeemed somewhat by industrial-strength echo effects. "Time" starts as a less focused take on "Traumaschine" before settling into a sparser take on the "Liebe" chord sequence.

Join Inn (also 1973) marks the return of Schulze, and pares the music back to the improvisational explorations of the debut (though Göttsching's partner Rosi adds occasional monologues.) There are two side-long tracks: "Freak 'N' Roll" is a relentless high energy power jam, but with instrumental roles sharply delineated, resulting in a disciplined and engaging cosmic jazz workout with bluesy interludes. The beautiful, beatless "Jenseits" pits guitar glissando against Schulze's synths in the customary pool of echo, sounding both ancient and futuristic.

Starring Rosi (1974) is usually seen as an oddity, an enjoyable if rather inconsequential set of laidback instrumental compositions featuring

Rosi's blanched monologues. With Schulze and Enke gone, it's essentially a fresh departure (aided by Harald Grosskopf and Dieter Dierks) bearing little resemblance to earlier albums. Still, it points the way towards the unabashed melodicism of his subsequent work, and its tone of sunny Californiana is one that he has often, perhaps unfortunately, defaulted to.

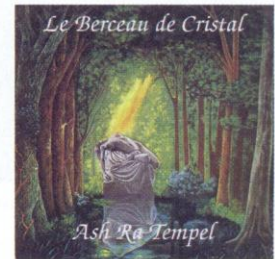


Inventions For Electric Guitar (1975) is the first album to be credited to Göttsching alone (though it too displays the Ash Ra Tempel brand name prominently on its utterly hideous mugshot sleeve). Using guitar, effects, multitracking and tape manipulation over three long tracks, he creates a compelling soundscape that is gorgeously lush as well as pulsating and expansive. While other players have exploited echo to create hypnotic rhythm – John Martyn, Steve Hillage (the latter of whom was part of an ensemble that performed *Inventions* in concert in Japan last year) – few have made such extensive or creative use of its possibilities. Nevertheless, the feeling remains when listening to the album that Göttsching is reaching towards effects that electronics could provide more effectively.



In the late 70s, working solo but operating as the shortened Ashra, Göttsching immersed himself in synths, an inevitable move in the light of *Inventions*. 1976's *New Age Of Earth* (was there ever a more damaging choice of album title?) and the following year's *Blackouts* proffer a form of highly melodic electronic minimalism, clearly indebted to Glass, Reich and Riley as much as his Berlin contemporaries Edgar Froese and Schulze. Certainly both albums have their fair share of sickly moments, but there are passages of great imagination and beauty here too, such as *New Age*'s pattern-based "Sunrain", and "Lotus" from *Blackouts*. With analogue sequencer workouts

having come back into fashion through the efforts of a multitude of chillwave hipsters, it's interesting to hear this kind of music today without the inverted commas. Following these albums Ashra became a bona fide group with longterm cohorts Lutz Ulbrich and Harald Grosskopf, recording a series of albums in the late 70s and 80s which, while sporadically interesting, often sound clunky and commercially compromised (*Correlations*, *Belle Alliance* and *Walkin' The Desert* have their moments; *Tropical Heat* doesn't).



Of greater note are the many hours of unearthed material that comprise the six volumes of the *Private Tapes* series (ranging from early ART live concerts to solo pieces that document Göttsching's transition from psych guitar maven to synthesizer dream-weaver.) A couple of other albums released in the 90s that illuminate this key period in his musical evolution are the 1975 soundtrack album to Philippe Garrel's film *Le Berceau De Cristal*, recorded with Lutz Ulbrich but rather disingenuously credited to Ash Ra Tempel, and the 1976 collaboration with Michael Hoenig, *Early Water*. Lastly, Göttsching's *Dream And Desire*, recorded in 1977, is close in style to the more contemplative moments of *Blackouts*.

Göttsching's post-E2-E4 releases have been sporadic to say the least, with no new original solo music forthcoming until the turn of the millennium. A pair of entertaining releases centred around his reunion with Klaus Schulze for a London concert under the name Ash Ra Tempel, one a live document of the event *Gin Rosé At The Royal Festival Hall*, and the other a studio album, *Friendship*, were released in 2000. In both cases, Göttsching's most overt contributions come in the form of a series of ecstatic guitar solos and spacey echo textures amid Schulze's mile-wide synth pads and spiky rhythms. His 2005 albums *Die Mulde* (mostly recorded in 97) and *Concert For Murnau* are soundtracks for an installation and a silent film respectively; the former shows a deft electronic touch, while the latter sees him incorporating elements of classical composition and instrumentation, but neither fully convinces as music that can make sense outside its original context. On the other hand, the various live retoolings of his earlier work that appear on both solo documents (*Live At Mt Fuji* and, of course, *E2-E4 Live In Japan*) and on albums with the resurrected Ashra (*Sauce Hollandaise* and *@shra 1 & 2*) are extremely strong, often stretching out from the originals with a sense of real adventure. □

