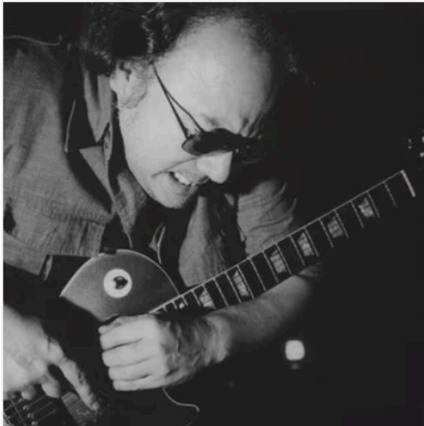


# Pitchfork

## Masayuki Takayanagi New Direction Unit – *April is the Cruellest Month*

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Unreleased at the time, the Japanese guitarist's elemental free jazz opus provides the missing link between Albert Ayler, Merzbow, and Acid Mothers Temple.

Few record labels provided succor for generations of freaks, seekers, and weirdos like ESP-Disk. Founded by lawyer Bernard Stollman in New York's bustling East Village in 1963 to promote the language of Esperanto, it soon pivoted to another kind of international language—music—introducing to the world the searing, ecstatic jazz of Albert Ayler and Sun Ra as well as the stoned folk of the Fugs and Pearls Before Swine. The ESP

catalog still sounds like little else in recorded music, radically obliterating all preconceived notions of what a saxophonist, a jazz singer, percussionist, or rock band might sound like. If only the label had gotten to the singular guitar of Masayuki “Jojo” Takayanagi.

That was the plan back in 1975 at least, when Stollman first encountered the Japanese guitarist and offered to put out a record on ESP-Disk. Takayanagi and band recorded a session in the spring of that year only to lose touch with Stollman over the summer. By fall the label was bankrupt and Takayanagi's *April is the Cruellest Month* sat on a shelf, only seeing release on CD in Japan some 16 years later. Now rescued by New York's Blank Forms label, *April* attempts to properly answer the big “What if?”s around it and to properly place Takayanagi as paterfamilias for the likes of Keiji Haino, Merzbow, Acid Mothers Temple, Michio Kurihara, and the PSF roster. There's no need to blow the dust off, as it sounds as vital and unfettered in 2019 as it did forty years ago.

Versed in blues, jazz standards, and modal excursions, but equally comfortable transforming his guitar into a gale-force storm (this particular concert from 1972 highlights his astonishing range), Masayuki “Jojo” Takayanagi got his start in cool jazz bands back in the 1950s. But his development paralleled that of jazz from halfway around the world, in particular the likes of 1960s Coltrane, forever seeking new vistas even as it challenged and alienated audiences. Takayanagi began to explore the sound of feedback as well as the kinds of sounds he could make by lying his guitar on a table top and attacking it with all manner of objects, be it a violin bow or metal. There are aspects of his sound that bring to mind the likes of Western peers like Jimi Hendrix, Sonny Sharrock, Derek Bailey, or AMM's Keith Rowe, but those players' sensibilities rarely overlap save in Takayanagi's work.

By the '70s, Takayanagi began to turn away from jazz completely, concerned less with chords and structure and more with conjuring elemental forces. One need only a few opening seconds from a live “Mass Projection” from 1973 to not so much hear as *feel* Takayanagi. *April is the Cruellest Month* captures Takayanagi during a fertile, frantic creative outburst in 1975, coming between formidable albums like *Eclipse* and *Axis/ Another Revolable Thing*. Had it come out back then, it would have been a mighty triumvirate for Takayanagi and a coup for the Japanese free-jazz scene, putting one of their most incandescent acts on the same roster as Ayler

and introducing Japan's music to the world at large. Similar in structure to *Eclipse* and *Axis*, *April* presents three different approaches across three long tracks gradually increasing in intensity and ferocity. "We Have Existed" features Kengi Mori's flute, Nobuyoshi Ino's kinetic bowed cello, and Hiroshi Yamazaki's careening freeform percussion. Each member scrabbles away at their sound and Jojo's guitar binds it all together. Approaching 20 minutes, "My Friend, Blood Shaking My Heart" is about as close as one can get to having a cyclone churn through your living room.

In the '80s, Takayanagi would collaborate with John Zorn and perform at international jazz festivals, but it was a missed opportunity to not have the Western world know what fierce sounds were arising from Japan. It would take until the 1990s for adventurous listeners to have their eardrums blown out by the likes of Keiji Haino, Les Rallizes Dénudés, and the like. How many budding young American guitarists might have stumbled across Takayanagi and *April is the Cruellest Month* knowing that they too could push even further into the unknown? Cruelly unreleased at the time, Takayanagi's sound remains formidable and transformative.

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