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Masayuki Takayanagi New Direction Unit – *April Is The Cruellest Month*

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By Dustin Krcatovich

This unheralded monster of 1970s Japanese guitar noise has waited over four decades to see a proper vinyl release. At long last, Dustin Krcatovich takes a bath in its unrepentant squall.

I've long suspected that there *had* to be a musician somewhere who'd been irrevocably changed by 'Free Form Guitar', that gristly slab of blaring soundmeat which sits smack in the middle of the (otherwise largely mom-safe) deluxe double platter *Chicago Transit Authority*. Terry Kath hardly invented atonal free improv, sure, but his contribution to the form is a damn sight easier to stumble across than Sonny Sharrock or Derek Bailey, and doubly so back then. Surely, someone must have been touched.

Well, cancel the search: word is, the late Japanese guitarist Masayuki Takayanagi is just the Kath-man I've had in mind. Previously a virtuosic Lennie Tristano devotee, 'Free Form Guitar' was the forceful hand that made Takayanagi turn his back on cool jazz in favour of high-lickin' freakout fires. *April Is The Cruellest Month* captures his band, New Direction Unit, a couple years into the post-revelation throes in 1975. The album was originally slated for release by American freak stable ESP-Disk, but that ever-shaky business endeavour collapsed on itself before the album could be released. This edition, from Brooklyn's excellent Blank Forms label, is the first non-Japanese release of this material, and its first vinyl pressing. Better late than never.

Unlike so much, time has not spoiled these sounds. It's the sort of stuff that squares will never adjust their ears toward; the aforementioned Sharrock is a clear touchstone, but it's notably more caustic, in line with 90s guitar noisers like Harry Pussy and Noggin. The relentless ensemble attack of sidelong album closer 'My friend, blood shaking my heart' could even be mistaken for Rudolph Grey's Blue Humans, which any sensible thrill-seeker should recognise as sky-high praise.

Takayanagi's work surely must have had an impact on younger countrymen like High Rise and Keiji Haino (both of whom would later become labelmates), but had this album been released in the west when it was first recorded, what else may've changed? Would No Wave have seemed hopelessly insufficient? Would bands like Fushitsusha have been less of a surprise? Would Takayanagi have toured with Chicago or, better yet, made the Nurse With Wound list? There's no way of knowing, I suppose, and there's no sense living in the past. The important thing is that *April Is The Cruellest Month* is here now, waiting to be someone else's 'Free Form Guitar' moment.

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