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Bio information: **UNIVERS ZERO**

Title: **RELAPS (Archives 1984 – 1986)** (Cuneiform Rune 280)

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FILE UNDER: ROCK / CHAMBER ROCK / EXPERIMENTAL / CLASSICAL

“...one of the most important groups of the 1980s ..Univers Zero conceptualize the Europe of the late 20th Century... dense, desperate and dark; ...above all beautiful and dramatic, strongly marked by the cultural traditions of Europe...Univers Zero may be classified somewhere between Bach and Bartok, Magma and Stravinsky...They represent something new, monumental, and important... a stirring lament over a European continent in physical and cultural decay ... a rare, intense, and magnanimous piece of work, and it is absolutely compulsory for everyone who’s...played their Magma records to shreds, and/or who would have wanted there to be a bit more electric bass and drums on Bartok’s string quartets.”

– Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Puls* [Norway], Feb 1989

“Univers Zero...forged a genre of music that might appropriately be dubbed post-rock, had the term not been coined 15 years too late. ...the Belgian’s craft at calculated pomp and nervous precision make Godspeed You! Black Emperor’s apocalyptic grandiosity seem like a Michael Bay movie in comparison. ...”

– Popmatters [USA]

“UZ’s music was an antecedent for the kind of instrumental and stylistic interspersions considered normal today by groups including Bang on a Can and Alarm Will Sound. Henry Cow’s complex, abstruse writing meets Bartok, Stravinsky, Messiaen and Ligeti, but with hints of early music, especially in UZ’s use of spinet and harmonium. ... This...nearly unheard-of group was creating a new kind of chamber music that, in its inclusion of rock instrumentation and the occasional rock stance, would be a blueprint for classical music of the 21st century.”

– All About Jazz [USA]

“Released in 1977, [their debut] was astonishing then; today, it sounds like the hidden source for every one of today’s avant-garde rock bands. ... Univers Zero are a revelation;...it’s a joy to discover that there’s more to digest – a whole back catalogue, leading up to the current day, and critical acclaim and a gigging band. “ – Organ [UK]

The Belgian band **Univers Zero** is legendary for its ominous, unsettling and uncompromising musical vision – a sound and stance that *Keyboard* describes as **“Chamber music for the Apocalypse”**. Simultaneously medieval & modern, its distinctive, dark and elegantly beautiful instrumental music fused classical and rock to give birth to an unprecedented and remarkably prescient new musical genre called “chamber rock”. UZ’s singular sound derives from its unique instrumentation (piano and keyboards, violin, clarinets, oboe/bassoon, English horn, saxophone, electric bass, guitar, drums) combined with brooding gothic imagery, elements of European folk and other world musics, the iconoclasm and intensity of rock, the relentless sonic experimentation of the avant-garde, and leader/ chief composer **Daniel Denis**’ classically-inspired writing style, influenced by early 20th Century avant-garde classical composers. The band has remained on the cutting edge of New Music throughout the course of a career that began in the ‘70s and continues today, stretching and disintegrating the boundaries of classical and rock music alike to create a new, vital, and unique fusion. Today, several decades after Univers Zero first forged its unique “chamber rock”, critics cite its oeuvre as the precursor to the best avant-garde rock and classical music of the present day, from post-rock, associated with **Godspeed You! Black Emperor**, **Kayo Dot** and other instrumental rock bands – to the numerous late 20th/early 21st C. classical chamber ensembles integrating rock into their repertoire, such as **Bang on a Can**, **Kronos Quartet** and others. When Cuneiform recently released a remastered reissue of the band’s self-titled debut album, critics who heard the band’s music for the first time called it a “revelation”, “...the hidden source for every one of today’s avant-garde rock bands” [*Organ*].

Back in the 1980s, however, in what was the band’s second decade of existence, Univers Zero stood very much alone, its music well beyond and outside that time. Featuring rock and classical instrumentation and sophisticated, passionate compositions, its dark and daring instrumental music stood in bold contrast to the artistic and cultural wasteland that characterized much ‘80s rock music. This new Univers Zero CD, called **Relaps: Archives 1984-1986**, is an archival project that documents the band in live performance during the mid-late 1980s. The band’s 11th CD, it is the only release of live material from the period during which Univers Zero recorded the two studio releases **UZED** [1984-Cryonic, 1988-Cuneiform], and **Heatwave** [1987-Cuneiform]. During that time, with Denis at its helm and some of the best musicians from Europe’s avant-garde at its instruments, Univers Zero created what was perhaps the boldest, most sonically powerful and above all, most overtly ROCK-oriented music of its lengthy career. The stellar performances and astounding music on *Relaps* are proof positive that Univers Zero was one of – and perhaps *the* – most adventurous rock band then playing on the international rock stage. *Relaps* captures the live band that caught Cuneiform’s ear more than 20 years ago, leading it to sign Univers Zero and release its 6th album, *Heatwave*, thus beginning a fruitful relationship that continues to the present day.

Univers Zero was founded in 1974. It had evolved out of **Necromicon**, a group begun by drummer **Daniel Denis** and trumpeter **Claude Deron** and named after a locale in **H. P. Lovecraft**’s work. By May 1974, the group had begun calling itself **Univers Zero**, named after a book by Belgian novelist **Jacques Sternberg**. During its first five years, under the co-leadership of composers **Daniel Denis** and **Roger Trigaux** (also the group’s guitarist), Univers Zero utilized a mixture of primarily acoustic classical and rock instrumentation to record 2 albums. Its first album, the self-titled **Univers Zero** (also known as **1313**), was released in 1977 in a tiny, limited edition and reissued soon after on **Atem**, the record label led by **Gérard Nguy**, publisher of France’s leading magazine of avant garde music. The power and originality of the band’s recorded debut stunned listeners at the time; decades later, the album continues to astound. Today, **Univers Zero** is acknowledged to mark the birth of “chamber rock”: a new and startlingly original musical genre – a perfect hybrid of classical music and rock – that may conceivably be the Francophone world’s most significant contribution to late 20th Century New Music. When Cuneiform released a remastered reissue of the album on its 30th anniversary, new listeners called it a “revelation”, “...the hidden source for every one of today’s avant-garde rock bands” [*Organ*]. Its landmark status self-evident, critics on both sides of the rock and classical camps recognized it as the template for “music that might appropriately be dubbed post-rock, had the term not been coined 15 years too late” and “the blueprint for classical music of the 21st century.”

(This press release is continued on the next page...)

Univers Zero landmark debut was followed in 1979 by the band's second album, called *Heresie* [1979-Atem, 1991-Cuneiform], widely considered to be one of the darkest and most menacing instrumental albums of all time. 1979 would prove to be an eventful year for the band.; it also marked Univers Zero's involvement as one of the five founding members of "**Rock In Opposition**" [RIO], a hugely influential European consortium of avant-garde bands initiated by **Chris Cutler** of **Henry Cow** (UK). Around this same time, shortly after *Heresie*'s release, Trigaux left Univers Zero to found his own band, **Present**. In his wake, **Andy Kirk** joined UZ. With keyboardist Kirk on board and contributing new compositions, Univers Zero released "their most comprehensive catalogue of horrors" [*Boston Rock*], *Ceux Du Dehors* [1981-Recommended/ReR, 1992-Cuneiform]. Live recordings from this period of Univers Zero's career, with Trigaux as guitarist and co-composer, and subsequently with **Kirk** as keyboardist and contributing composer, would be released years later as a Japanese lp and a CD on Cuneiform, called *Crawling Wind* [1983-Eastern Works/ReR Japan, 2001-Cuneiform].

During the 1980s, Univers Zero was without question one of the most adventurous bands on the international rock scene. Distinctive but never stagnant, Univers Zero's sound evolved and progressed with each of several new lineups during this decade, and each subsequent release. Univers Zero began experimenting with electronic elements such as samples, and integrating more electric instruments (keyboards and a more prominent electric guitar) into its sonic mix to produce a bolder and more 'contemporary' sound that was as sophisticated as it was emotive. In a creative surge, composers Denis and Kirk wrote more material during the early '80s than they could find record labels to release; *Ceux du Dehors* featured only a portion of their prolific output. In addition, the all-instrumental group had difficulty finding gigs to perform their classically-influenced, complex compositions live, as most rock bookers (and the audiences they served) preferred No Wave and other trend-oriented rock genres du jour. These stresses, among other reasons, contributed to Kirk quitting the band in 1983.

Relaps: Archives 1984-1986 documents Univers Zero during the mid-late 1980s, a period in which the band, with Denis as leader and sole composer at the helm, continued to break new sonic ground. Following Kirk's departure, Denis eventually assembled the line-up that is featured on *Relaps*' first four tracks: Denis on drums, **Dirk Descheemaeker** on clarinet, bass clarinet, soprano saxophone; **Christian Genet** on bass, **André Mergenthaler** on cello and alto sax, and **Jean-Luc Plouvier** on keyboards. This version of UZ played a series of shows in Europe in February and March, 1984, previewing new compositions by Denis. *Relaps* features three Denis works that were recorded on March 31, 1984 in a concert at The Pavilion at Hannover, Germany, and a fourth Denis composition recorded on Feb. 25th 1984 in Dottignies, Belgium. Several months later, in September-October 1984, the group went into the studio to record this new material for their 5th album, called *UZED* [1984-Cryonic, 1988-Cuneiform]. Released originally on **Cryonic**, *UZED* was reissued and released worldwide 4 years later by Cuneiform, garnering critical praise for its "violent sound...[which] writhes with a sinister energy" [*Goldmine*]

Following the recording of *UZED*, Univers Zero evolved once again with a new, expanded line-up, documented here on tracks 5-8 of *Relaps*. Invited to join the French band **Art Zoyd**, highly active on the European concert scene, Mergenthaler left Univers Zero. In his place, former UZ violinist **Patrick Hannapier** re-joined the fold – as did Kirk, whose keyboard complimented that of Plouvier. A new guitarist, **Michel Delory**, also joined the band, which retained on-going members **Deescheemaeker** (clarinets and saxophones) and Genet (bass). This septet version of Univers Zero performed at two prestigious, large-scale events in Belgium in October, 1985 and played at the **Frankfurt Jazz Festival** in Germany on February 7, 1986. The group performed Denis' newest, post-*UZED* composition, and several previously-unrecorded works that Kirk had written for Univers Zero in 1981-'83. *Relaps* features a recording made at the Frankfurt Jazz Festival of Denis' composition, "**Emanations**", and recordings made on October 9, 1985 at the Centre Cultura de Seraing in Belgium of two Kirk compositions ("**The Funeral Plain**" and "**Heatwave**") and Denis' "**L'Etrange Mixture du Docteur Schwartz**".

The dual keyboard/Kirk-Plouvier line-up turned out to be an unlikely success. As relayed by **Aymeric Leroy** and **Renato Moraes** in their extensive liner notes for *Relaps*, published in the booklet, augmented by historical photos, that accompanies the CD:

"Andy was into smooth, clean sounds—piano, strings and brass," Plouvier explains. "Our sound became more symphonic, more English, exactly the opposite of what I was trying to achieve. So I would offset that by making ugly noises with the DX7! Andy found this very funny—he had a great sense of humor! It was also great to have Michel Delory. He was a brilliant funk guitarist, very much in the 1980s style, very economical.... Daniel kept begging him to play distorted, Hendrix-style solos, but all he got in return was a vaguely ironic smile!" Kirk too looks back fondly on the septet. "That line-up was incredible. We played with such energy! The versions we did of "The Funeral Plain" were the best ever—with a stupendous guitar solo by Michel."

In July and September of 1986, this septet version of Univers Zero went into the studio to record *Heatwave*. Released early the next year on Cuneiform, *Heatwave* captured the attention of the avant-music press, prompting *Option*, then the leading magazine devoted to experimental music, to comment that "the band sounds much like a mating of **Stravinsky**, **Bartok**, the **Art Bears**, mid-period **King Crimson**, and **Anthony Davis**' *Episteme*." Unfortunately, Denis had decided to dissolve the band by the time they returned from the Frankfurt festival. *Heatwave*, the CD formerly agreed upon as the band's first Cuneiform recording and thus a new beginning for the band – was now intended as its swansong, a document of the final line-up.

Frustrated by his band being relegated to music's fringe during the 1980s, with only limited opportunities for live performances and minimal album sales, Denis dismantled Univers Zero after *Heatwave*'s release. The CD *Relaps* documents the final lineups of UZ's early years, before the band went dormant for nearly a decade. During the 1990s, Denis released two albums of new compositions, called *Sirius and the Ghost* (1991) and *Les Eaux Troubles* (1993) under his own name on Cuneiform, and Cuneiform began reissuing Univers Zero's entire back catalogue. Cuneiform's reissues met with worldwide acclaim; the world was finally catching up to UZ's 'chamber rock'. Denis reactivated the band as a live performing and recording project at the end of the '90s, and has since released a series of releases of new Univers Zero material on Cuneiform, including three studio recordings – *The Hard Quest* (1999), *Rhythmix* (2002), and *Implosion* (2004) – and a live recording made of the band in concert in 2005, called *Live!* (2006). Besides releasing Univers Zero's new material, Cuneiform continues doing augmented reissues of the band's back catalogue, accompanied by bonus material and liner notes, as well as issuing previously-unreleased archival material such as the live recordings on *Relaps*.

[press release/bio text by Joyce E. Nalewajk]

for more information on Univers Zero, please see:
www.univers-zero.com - www.myspace.com/universzero

PROMOTIONAL PHOTOS FOR *RELAPS: ARCHIVES 1984-1986*:



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