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Dan Kaufman/Barbez *Force of Light*, out Sept. 25th on Tzadik

Dan Kaufman and the band he founded, Barbez, have become important fixtures in the New York music scene, working at the cross-section of rock, Eastern European folk, downtown experimental, and punk-cabaret. The band's last release, *Insignificance* (2005), won sterling reviews, despite its unconventional sound (without a doubt the world's only theremin-marimba-vibes-guitar-bass-drum combo). Since then the group has toured widely all over the world, including performances in Russia, the Balkans, and across Western Europe and the United States.

Force of Light is Kaufman's searing homage to Holocaust survivor and poet Paul Celan. The album, to be released on September 25th on John Zorn's Tzadik label, is a three-year long labor of love and features eight new pieces, all written by Kaufman and performed by Barbez. The genesis of the album came about after Zorn saw a Barbez performance and asked Kaufman to write something for the Jewish series on his label. Ever since he first read Celan, a decade earlier, Kaufman had the desire to make a series of songs about Paul Celan. Zorn, it turned out, was also a big Celan fan. He immediately agreed to the project.

Widely regarded as one of the greatest poets of the 20th century, Paul Celan was born in 1920 into a Jewish family in Czernowitz, an ethnically diverse city near the border of Romania and Ukraine. In the summer of 1942, the Nazis and their Romanian allies initiated a roundup of the Jews of Czernowitz, and Celan's parents were deported to a concentration camp in Ukraine. His father died there of typhus, and, shortly afterward, his mother was shot by a guard. Though he escaped the roundup in which his parents were captured, Celan was sent to a forced-labor camp in southern Romania, and he spent nearly two years in a series of labor camps across the country.

To make this record, Kaufman spent years delving into Celan's work, including a month in Berlin grappling with both solitude and the Holocaust—two central themes of Celan's poetry. Over about a year and a half, the album was tracked and mixed with long-time collaborator Martin Bisi (Sonic Youth, Herbie Hancock, Dresden Dolls). *Force of Light* features Barbez's current line-up: Pamela Kurstin (David Byrne, Air) on theremin, Peter Hess (Balkan Beat Box) on clarinets, Kaufman on guitars (electric, nylon, and lap steel), Danny Tunick (Bang on a Can All-Stars) on vibes and marimba, Dan Coates and Peter Lettre trading off on bass, and John Bollinger (Antony and the Johnsons) on drums. Joining the core group are some special guests: Fiona Templeton, a renowned Scottish poet and theatre director, reads Celan's words; Catherine McRae (Richard Maxwell) and Sarah Bernstein contribute on violin; and long-time Barbez collaborator Julia Kent (Antony and the Johnsons) plays the cello.

Like previous Barbez recordings, *Force of Light* covers a wide musical terrain. The album includes a folk-songish lament, "Aspen Tree," based on a poem about the murder of Celan's mother at a concentration camp in the Ukraine ("Dandelion, so green is the Ukraine. My yellow-haired mother did not come home"). "The Sky Beetle," an eerie work filled with melancholy violin and timpani-like drumming, is based on a poem written shortly before Celan committed suicide, in which he says that "the death you still owe me, I carry it out." An epic piece, "Conversation in the Mountains," is a fourteen-and-a-half minute musical mediation driven by a lap steel guitar, vocal-like theremin, and a vibrato-tinged vibraphone; the song is based on a long fable about an alienated Jewish wanderer in the mountains. "Black Forest," inspired by a famous 1960s meeting between the philosopher and Nazi-apologist Martin Heidegger and Celan, touches on both German philosophy and musical references like *Ethiopiennes* and *Hawaii Five-O*, with a one-of-a-kind surf-theremin playing the melody.

"A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the not always greatly hopeful belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land," Paul Celan told a German audience in 1958. *Force of Light* are songs that try to honor that hope.

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