Gareth Williams

Ed Baxter

Gareth Williams, who has died of cancer aged 48, was a founder member of This Heat, a rock trio whose significance and musicality the historically minded listener would favourably compare to Cream or the Jimi Hendrix Experience, but whose recalcitrant experimentalism led them far away from mainstream success.

Williams was born in Cardiff in 1953. After taking his A-levels, he took up a job as a Drugs Rehabilitation Counsellor in Newfoundland. By the mid 1970s he was working in retail as the deputy manager of the Cranbourn Street, Westminster branch of HMV, a post he held with a madcap degree of irresponsibility. Once, to win a television set offered as an A&M sales promotion, he purchased for the shop hundreds of copies of Rick Wakeman's "The Six Wives of Henry VIII". On receipt of the tv, he returned the records as faulty, having himself scratched and made unsaleable the entire shipment. Williams was a fanatical listener and record collector and as such attracted the attention of guitarist Charles Bullen and drummer Charles Hayward. Hayward was rehearsing with Bill MacCormick, bass player with Matching Mole, the pair having been persuaded by an unexpected Top 30 hit to reform Quiet Sun, a band they had formed at school with Phil Manzanera, then guitarist of Roxy Music. Bullen handled the guitar parts and Williams was brought in to add a missing spark of vitality to the group, but his lack of musical training was anathema to Quiet Sun's formal brand of progressive rock. For Bullen and Hayward,however, Williams was a revelation, a maniacal performer whose intuitive approach was urgent and deeply liberating. There had been non-musicians working in rock before,notably Brian Eno in Roxy Music, but Williams was perhaps the first to take centre stage rather than being merely adding colour to familiar forms. The trio set about reinventing rock in a manner reliant on accident and deliberately devoid of technique.

This Heat played its first concert on February 13 1976, mere days after it had formed. (As a sign of their confidence from the outset, they included "Rainforest," recorded at this gig, on their debut LP). In the early days noisy instrumental improvisations dominated; but This Heat were also adept at songs and gradually achieved a balance between the abstract and the formal. In concert, trance-like ambient soundscapes would typically fade into riotous, even danceable, anthems before giving way to a heady shower of glorious noise or leery episodes of half-stoned silence. This Heat attracted an audience of fervent admirers and enthusiastic critics, for whom Williams became "the musician's non-musician."

This Heat took to using tape recordings in concert, with Williams becoming adept at playing cassette machine as a solo instrument. For them tape was a legitimate element in its own right, a creative rather than recreative musical source which allowed them to bring into the mix sounds from another time and place. It provided This Heat with an other-worldliness which arose directly from their own lives and previous playing experiences and which lent the band a singular vibe of vertiginous alienation. They played at extremely loud volume,usually in pitch darkness. From the start, and with a kind of light-headed arrogance born of the unexpected discovery of something new, This Heat deliberately set themselves apart from other groups, an attitude that prefigured the punk explosion that followed and partially engulfed them a few months later—and which they in turn influenced as pub rock simplicity gave way to post-punk experimentation. They issued a spoof manifesto: "This Heat was made out of the collective desire of its members not to be in any other groups." They set up their own rehearsal and recording studio in Brixton, Cold Storage. Here they recorded their first album, "This Heat"(1979), taking over two years to assemble it. The maxi-single "Health and Efficiency," perhaps their finest single work, was released in 1980, a deliriously upbeat song "about the sunshine" which allowed Williams to display his now considerable skill as a musical bricoleur. This was followed by "Deceit" in 1981, an LP which put its finger on that fearful era's g-spot, decrying the nuclear arms race and media disinformation in a sequence of exquisitely executed but agonised songs. If it voiced a bitter anger at the world in general, "Deceit" perhaps also articulated the tensions within the band.

By the time it was released, Williams had quit the group. Having once declared that This Heat was the music the three of them made together, Bullen and Hayward nevertheless carried on, now joined by bass player Trefor Goronwy and keyboardist Ian Hill. The band's final concert took place in London on May 18 1982. By then Williams was in Kerala, south India, where he studied kathakali dance-drama. He converted to Hinduism, mainly to gain easier access to temples. On his return to London, Williams co-authored the first edition of "The Rough Guide to India" and took a Degree in Indian Religions and Music at the School of Oriental and African Studies.

In 1985 Williams with Mary Currie made "Flaming Tunes," a collection of raw yet plaintive songs,domestically recorded and released more or less surreptitiously in a hand-coloured cassette package. While This Heat was angrily engaged with social issues, "Flaming Tunes" found Williams in a calmer, introspective mood, singing suggestively autobiographical fragments: "My body moves forward. This restless mind runs back like a banner that flaps in the wind."

In the 1990s he played with Hayward in the short-lived avant-rock project, Mind The Gap, and was one of many players featured in Hayward's monthly "Accidents & Emergencies" improvisation series at the Albany Empire in Deptford.He was also active as a promoter as well as working occasionally as a DJ and pursuing his own musical projects, recording obsessively at home, notably with Maritn Harrison (one of This Heat's pool of engineers) and singer Viv Corringham. The advent of compact discs had led to a renewed interest in This Heat and the albums were re-released,along with the archival "Made Available: John Peel Sessions" and "Repeat". Williams was diagnosed with cancer in September 2001. Early in December 2001 the three members of This Heat got together once more and tentatively rehearsed with a view to a live performance or new recording.Before any resolution to their diverse musical or temperamental differences could be reached Williams died, on Christmas Eve. He is survived by his partner, Nick Goodall.

[Gareth John Williams, musician, born April 23 1953; died December 24 2001]