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German-Swiss Dialect Rock:

In the Land of Cheese and Chocolate

More than a decade ago German-Swiss rock musicians «discovered» their own dialect. At the University of Basle, Krešimir Hoborka pursued this phenomenon within the frame of his academic degree work and dealt with the history of dialect rock as well as the relationship of the musician to his own tradition.

Up until the beginning of the seventies there was hardly a Swiss rock musician who could imagine standing up on a stage and treating his audience to songs in its own language. To hear their favourite music sung in the vernacular would inevitably have aroused in the German-Swiss admirers of groups such as the *Rolling Stones* or the *Beatles* a mental association with the somewhat derided German hits of the time or, say, the *Berne Troubadours*, equally disdained by some. Indeed, the dialect could not have been much further away from rock music. Toni Vescoli, whose *Sauterelles* were regarded as the Swiss Beatles, wrote his lyrics, as best he could, in English and later adapted and rearranged them with his brother who had a better command of that language. He, too, found the contemplative idiom of Heidi and Peter the goatherd almost totally unsuited to modern, big-city rock music and he looked upon the use of English as completely natural for his purposes. After all, anyone who wanted to understand every word of the lyrics could have them retranslated; so, for years, the Swiss sang Swiss songs which required a translation aid on both sides. This was not regarded as a contradiction, for it was not primarily a question of tales which had to be told: what was important was the music – and the *rhythm*. It was quite enough as long as the listener understood just a few snatches of

the text. In this way he could surrender all the more completely to his fantasy, to his dreams. Further, he had probably already gathered considerable experience in listening to his favourite English and American groups. Thus, the need for a full understanding of the lyrics did not exist, which strikes the observer as strange when he thinks how eager to communicate, and how full of new ideas, the youth of the sixties



«Frostschutz»

was. At the same time, however, dreams, not infrequently experienced under the influence of drugs, were for the young person of the sixties the pathway to his or her own self, the road to a heightened consciousness. Mick Jagger, *Rolling Stones* singer, points to this significance of dreams when in the song «Ruby Tuesday» he says: «Lose your dreams and you'll lose your mind». In 1967, at the time Jagger wrote this song, the Interlaken musician Urs Hofer, soon to become well

known under the name of Polo Hofer as the «Father of German-Swiss Dialect Rock», was travelling with his dance band from one beat shack to another.

Success with the vernacular

So the groups played the current English hits and tried as best they could to hold their own in the then inflationary, swollen-headed music scene. Very great enthusiasm was hardly to be seen. Not until Hofer broke the language taboo and started to mix up the English with the Berne dialect, did his band cause a sensation. The «Warehuus Blues» (Department Store Blues) of his *Rumpelstilz* group was virtually the first German-Swiss dialect rock production: the single was recorded in 1973 in the Sinus Studio in Berne. Soon afterwards, *Rumpelstilz* produced its first LP: «Vogelfuetter», or Birdseed (Schnoutz 6326 925), which incorporated, as an evocation of the homeland, the folk song «Hab oft im Kreise der Lieben», sung in traditional arrangement by a children's choir. Here, the inner contradiction between the actual origin of the song and the Anglo-American tradition of rock music is still to be felt – a contrast that, at first, we try to analyse against the background of the light-hearted, smiling embodiment, in the record, of an «unprocessed» folk song. This brave production met with no appreciation on the part of the record companies; not one of them was able to find any humour in it at all. So it was launched independently at *Rumpelstilz's* own cost – and was an immediate hit with the public. Over the years which followed, *Rumpelstilz* made regular visits to the studio in the Münstergasse in Berne, and recorded at their own costs and for their own account the LPs «Füüf Narre im Charre» (Schnoutz 6326 930), «La dolce vita» (Schnoutz 6326 933) and the double-LP «Fätze u

Bitze» (Schnoutz 6641 830). In German-Swiss dialect the titles mean «Five Fools in a Cart» and «Bits and Pieces». *Rumpelstilz* won a Golden Disc for the more than 50,000 copies of «Füüf Narre im Charre» sold. This group dominated the dialect rock scene for very many years. At about the time when Hofer's band started up, the Zurich group of *Lise Schatt* also began to sing its

other bands also took the plunge, with the result that people even began talking about a «dialect rock wave».

«Frostschutz» and «ExTrem Normal»

All the same, very little was offered that could hold a candle to Hofer, either musically or in respect of lyrics and text. Even so,

Es Tram hed sich verirrt
(A tram has gone astray)
Ein Anarchischt isch unterwägs
(An anarchist is on his way)
Mit Deo Spray
(With Deo spray)

In its LP: «Welcome in Schwitserländ» the Berne group «*ExTrem Normal*» also proved to be refreshingly cocky. Remarkable, how up to now in Swiss dialect rock old clichés are being taken up again and again, as long as they relate to the old homeland; a sign, perhaps, of the conflicting relationship of the Swiss towards their own culture. Lyrics like the following, taken from the title verse of the above LP, seem to bear out this contention:

Welcome in Schwitserländ
(Welcome to Switzerland)
Dert isch aues no zwäg
(There everything's still OK)
Dert isch aues no schön
(There everything's still fine)
Und d'Lüt die wohne im ne Chalet
(And the people, they live in a chalet)
Und mache Chocolat und mache Chäs
(And they make chocolate and they make cheese)

And of course the two ever-recurring, evocative catchwords: «watches» and «banks» are also mentioned in the lyric, for dialect rock likes to pretend to be critical. It is difficult to foretell the direction it will follow in future but one thing is certain: dialect rock has established itself above all through the persona of Polo Hofer who, thirteen years ago, broke the ice and showed that it is possible for the Swiss, at least, to sing rock music in their own vernacular. Just as certain, too, is the fact that the relationship of the Swiss to their own culture and idiom in dialect rock is still divided. The dialect rock wave which originated in German-Switzerland at the beginning of the eighties today seems to have ebbed. ●



«SPAN» (Photo: Beat Krattiger)

songs in dialect. So did the Berne group of *Span* who, next to Polo Hofer, are Switzerland's most longlived combination of rock musicians. When, after eight years, *Rumpelstilz* broke up, *Span* and Polo Hofer joined to form a group called *Polo's Schmetterding*, a combination which was able to exploit the dialect even more successfully. Two further LPs: «Tip-topi Type», *Tip-Top Guys* (Schnoutz 6326 940) and «Enorm in Form» (Schnoutz 6399 138) won the golden award. So, up to the beginning of the eighties, it was only the two groups of Polo Hofer which appeared before the public with dialect rock productions. Later, however,

the *Frostschutz* (Anti-Freeze) group must be mentioned, a combination which, using the sound of the accordion as well as independent lyrics and text, captured much of what was fascinating and delightful in sound and music on its first LP: «*Frostschutz*» (Musk mp 815). And everyone should listen at least once to the song called «*Zürinacht*» (Zurich Night) which goes:
Züri hed Siitewind
(Zurich has a crosswind)
De See hed frei
(The Lake's off duty)
Hotelzimmer läbid gschwind
(Hotel rooms go quickly)
Irgendwo passiert es Chind
(Somewhere a child happens)