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Dialect rock in Berne

From Polo Hofer to Patent Ochsner



Dialect rock in Switzerland means mostly Bernese rock. Bands like Rumpelstilz and Patent Ochsner are in the good tradition of the old troubadours.

It was not in the capital city on the Aare but much farther up the river that five young "birds" laid the foundations of Bernese dialect rock. In 1971 the age of the hippies was on its way out all over the world, but not in In-

Felix Maurhofer

terlaken. In the warm summer nights the Freaks – which was the name of the birds – came together on the bonny, bonny banks of Lake Thun to serenade the night sky with guitar and Woodstock ballad. On such a night as this, Polo Hofer called up his native language, thought of the ancient troubadours of Berne, and said: "Why not rock in dialect?"

The idea bore rich fruit. Singer Polo Hofer, guitarist Schifer Schafer, drummer Küre Güdel, bass Sämi Jungen and keyboardist Hanery Amman joined together in Rumpelstilz. Sämi Jungen soon gave way to Milan Popovitch. They had problems to start with, but in 1974 the valiant group came on the market with the first genuine dialect rock LP "Vogelfueter" (Bird Food). Soon afterwards – in 1975 – another Bernese rock group, Grünsplan, later shortened

to Span, released their successful single, Bärner Rock. Co-founders Matthias and Christoph Kohli and Schöre Müller are still into Bärner Rock. They may be badly overshadowed by Polo Hofer, but they did bring out almost ten albums up to 1993.

Polo lives for ever

The double album, Fätze u Bitze vo geschter u jitze, was a thing of shreds and patches. After the 1978 fallout, Polo Hofer was looking for a new band. He joined the Span musicians under the name of Schmetterding to make four albums. But this cooperative venture came to an end in 1982. Ever ready to start again from scratch, he formed his third band, Polo Hofer and the Schmetterband. Now his persistence has paid off, his music is caviar to Swiss ears. One record after another has been crowned with glory, and Polo's singing career looks to have no end.

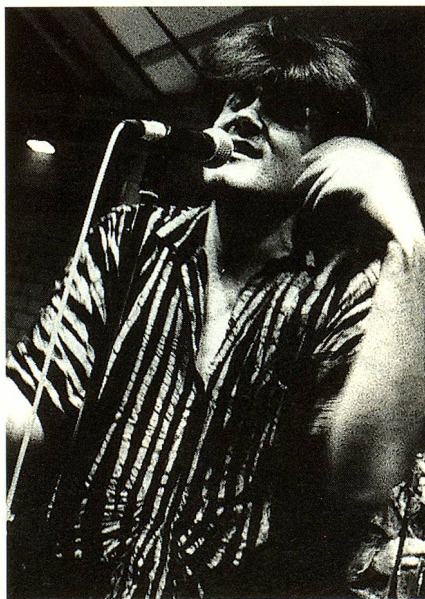
The songs of Rumpelstilz were inspirational to other Bernese musicians.

Kuno Lauener, the singer of the band called Züri West, was also writing in Bernese dialect, influenced by Rumpelstilz' song, D'Rosmarie und i. The Berne City Guitar Band started up a flourishing sub-culture. Its galloping concerts in full houses like Berne's Reithalle echoed by word of mouth up and down and all along the valleys. The Bümplitz-Casablanca production reverberated through the 1989 Swiss pop charts like a hurricane. After just a few weeks the disc hit the top of the list with a bang, and Polo Hofer was faced with his first bit of real competition.

Tuning up in Belpmoos

Not far from Berne is the sleepy little village of Belp. But Belp has an international airport by the name of Belpmoos. It's also the name of the song which Patent Ochsner used for its superb dialect takeoff. Nobody would have thought that the dialect scene could take another big-time band. Suddenly everything else seemed cold coffee. Singer Büne Huber turned 1991 on its head with his salty texts and the music of his band. The mix of fairground, rock and jazz anchored the tunes of Schlachtplatte – or Mixed Grill – deep in the hearts of the Swiss.

Then there were lots of other Bernese dialect bands, like the Dänu Siegrist Band, Stop the Shoppers and Natacha. But none of them ever scaled the heights of Polo Hofer and Patent Ochsner. But one thing the Bernese dialect bands never did despite their success at home: they didn't take off abroad. The only one whose songs crossed the frontiers of Switzerland was Stephan Eicher. The whole of France can sing Mani Matter's Swiss-German "Hemmige" in its sleep. And this shows beyond the shadow of a doubt that Berne's dialect rock must indeed have its roots in the troubadours. It is surely the role of each new generation of musicians to prevent the creative achievement of the past from fading away.



Polo Hofer (see above) and Büne Huber: two famous figures of Bernese dialect rock. (Photos: fm)