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Helvetia's unofficial royals – a lexicon



URS ALTERMATT (PUBLISHER):
"DAS BUNDESRATSLEXIKON"
(THE FEDERAL COUNCIL
LEXICON), NZZ LIBRO, ZÜRICH
2019, 759 PAGES, CHF 98

For 171 years, the Swiss government has been in office without a single day's interruption. The whole government is never replaced at once, it is without exception the individual members who change. "Only monarchies enjoy the same continuity," writes Urs Altermatt in his Federal Council lexicon ("Das Bundesratslexikon"), a work that was first published under his name in 1991 and has now been revised and updated. Altermatt suggests that Switzerland's Federal Councillors are the country's "unofficial royals". His book is regarded as the definitive history of the Federal Council and a reference work for administra-

tors, politicians, the media and academics.

Altermatt is Professor Emeritus in Contemporary History at the University of Fribourg and one of the best authorities on the Federal Council. He put together a team of 93 top-class writers who provide an impressive and vivid lexicon-based account of the 119 people who have served on the Federal Council since the modern Swiss Confederation was founded in 1848, covering their elections to and resignations from the Federal Council as well as their earlier life and work as a whole. This carefully illustrated lexicon, enriched with a range of informative tables, is not only of scholarly interest, it is also a fascinating historical study based on an institution that Altermatt believes is "without doubt the most original product of the Swiss political system".

Apart from its biographical slant, Altermatt's work provides an overview of 170 years of Swiss history as well as a variety of surprising insights – and personal tragedies in some cases. The Bernese Federal Councillor Carl Schenk, who used to walk to the Federal Palace every day, is a good example. While donating some spare coins to a pauper on his way past Berne's famous Bear Pit early in the morning on 8 July 1895 – a route he often took – Schenk was run over by a horse-drawn carriage and died shortly after, having served for 31 years. Fridolin Anderwert, a Federal Councillor from Thurgau, also died in office. Immediately after his election as President of the Confederation, Anderwert was the victim of a malicious press campaign about his private life. He also had health problems. On 25 December 1880, Christmas Day, he shot himself on the Kleine Schanze within sight of the Federal Palace.

JÜRGEN MÜLLER

A fanfare of nostalgia



STEPHAN EICHER
"HÜH!",
UNIVERSAL MUSIC /
POLYDOR

"Creating mayhem on stage, with kids whose mums knew me as a rock star." This is how Stephan Eicher, 58, described his latest album to the media. "Hüh!" is something of a gamble, combining the sounds of a resonant orchestra with the trademark soft voice of the Bernese crooner. The album sells itself like this: "In September 1978, Stephan boarded a night train from Bern to Paris... 40 years later, a secret from the past has finally caught up with him..."

The sleeve design is a nod to an album by the popular French singer, Alain Bashung. Showing an image of dampened confetti, it seems almost morbid. For Eicher, it is the symbol of a flawed industry. In his eyes, "the party's over". "Hüh!"'s 12 tracks – including 8 covers and 4 new songs – run back and forth between energetic rhythms and intimate ballads, with a wonderful mix of joyful madness from Traktorkestar, a Bernese orchestra with a passion for Balkan music, and the carefully edited texts of the Swiss rocker. Eicher has his luxury brass band cover two of his biggest hits: "Pas d'ami (comme toi)" and "Combien de temps". But the emotion and poetry of this CD are hidden more in tracks like "Chenilles", an original song which opens with a multitude of brass instruments, leading to a folk guitar accompaniment. The deep hum of the tuba bass line envelopes the listener in a soft glow that illuminates the album throughout. "Où que tu ailles, où que tu sois / Le superflu, le nécessaire, comme de la glue qui colle aux doigts" sings Eicher: Wherever you go, wherever you are / The superfluous, the necessary, like glue that sticks to your fingers.

The opening track of this 15th studio album, released after six years of quarrelling with his record company and health problems in 2018, "Ce peu d'amour" carries the rock feel typical of the Yenish musician's greatest hits. This time, Traktorkestar takes on the sound of a Gypsy orchestra, creating a joyous, all-encompassing brass explosion. "Louanges" is also covered in this style, with the artist singing of lost love and time gone by. The album ends with the dusky tones of "Nocturne". A translation for English speakers: "Calm at last, it's night and all is...." All is what? "All is... said" concludes Stephan Eicher. The album ends with a fanfare epilogue.

STEPHANE HERZOG