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Stephan Eicher – the Swiss troubadour

The Bernese singer and composer received a prize for his life's work at the Swiss Music Awards in March. Eicher has come through a major dispute with his record company – and distilled these tensions into a heartfelt album.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

It is 8 p.m. in the famous Lucerne Culture and Convention Centre concert hall, and the audience are waiting for their hero. Stephan Eicher's fans have an average age of at least 50. Even rockers age, as the Swiss singer readily jokes. The evening sees Eicher enter the stage leaning on his signature walking stick, the cruel legacy of a car accident. Eicher talks to his audience in Swiss German, habitually flicking back his salt-and-pepper

mane. Rolling back the years, he has invited a raft of young artists to his gala performance, including KT Gorique, a female rapper from Valais, as well as young and trendy Jeans for Jesus and Dabu Fantastic from German-speaking Switzerland.

Eicher also pokes fun at this filmed appearance ahead of the 13th Swiss Music Awards on 28 February, the following day, when he is due to receive the Outstanding Achievement Award. The rocker with a string

of French hits to his name – including “Déjeûner en paix” – will celebrate another red-letter day on 17 August, when he turns 60.

Eicher – Bernese-born of Yenish and Alsatian stock – is a sensitive and rebellious soul. This complex make-up has helped him to stay on the scene despite a very bitter conflict with his record label Barclay. Hostilities began in 2012 between big player Universal and the free-spirited artist, casting a six-year long

Stephan Eicher at the Lucerne concert on 27 February 2020, accompanied by the Homeless Songs Band.

Photo: Marco Masiello



shadow over Eicher's career. As Eicher himself explained to the media, his initial reaction was one of anger. This culminated in him making an album for his record label featuring songs so short that the entire album was free to download. He went back to being an artist when the fury subsided, and was more interested in speaking to his fans than seeking revenge.

Two-album comeback in 2019

Eicher produced two contrasting albums on his return in 2019. "Hüh!" featured some old numbers with a supporting fanfare from the Bernois de Traktorkestar brass band. Eight months later, the singer-songwriter released an intimate, heartfelt album called "Homeless Songs". He showcased some of the songs from these two albums in Lucerne – a long evening that saw him content to play the role of conductor, leaving the microphone to artists from different genres, regions and generations. The maestro invited various friends on stage, starting with Sophie Hunger. The Swiss singer, sporting a sequin outfit, provided one of the highlights of the evening on piano. Next up was Tinu Heiniger, who displayed his talent for storytelling and evoked the attractive sounds of Swiss mountain names in his Bernese dialect.

Other luminaries present at the gala evening included Swiss writer Martin Suter and French fellow-writer Philippe Djian. This literary duo had written lyrics each in their own language that Eicher put to

music. Clad in a petroleum-blue suit, Suter read out one of his own texts, raising laughs from the audience with his account of a Monopoly evening with Eicher during which both had a little too much to drink. Djian, who has been writing lyrics for Eicher since 1989, talked about how his musician friend would call him in the middle of the night to play him a tune. Just like the philosopher Michel de Montaigne before him, Eicher holds the theme of friendship close to his heart. As a child, he discovered music in his father's cellar in the company of his two brothers Martin and Erich. Eicher believes that music can unite people. This is why every Sunday he invites the villagers of Aigues-Mortes, where he lives in France, to get together and sing. "People who love la blonde [far-right politician Marine le Pen, Ed.] and people who loathe her come together as one," he explains.

Eicher's family roots are revealed in "Unerhört Jenisch", a documentary dedicated to Yenish music of the type practised in the canton of Grisons. Eicher had a great-grandmother who was taken from her family and placed in an institution. Many children from Yenish families shared her fate – a tragic story that was kept hidden from the singer and his brothers. "We can only sing about such things. We don't talk about them," says Eicher, who does jamming sessions with two Yenish friends from Grisons at his Camargue home. Eicher certainly has gypsy blood but feels he lacks that 'inner music', unlike the Yenish in the documentary.

Five iconic Stephan Eicher tracks



"Eisbär" (1981):

With its repetitive lyrics and cold sound loops, this ultra-minimalist number sounds like a student prank. But "Eisbär" was a 1981 hit in Germany. Grauzone split up shortly after.



"Les chansons bleues" (1983/2019):

"Le monde entier est toujours là, demain de beau matin je fermerai ma porte, j'irai par les chemins" (The world outside is always there, tomorrow will be a beautiful morning, I'll shut my door and follow the paths). Eicher mumbles more than he sings, but the melody is exhilarating. The rocker rereleased the song as part of "Hüh!" in 2019. Bolstered by a brass section, the second version adds depth to the original.



"Tu ne me dois rien" (1991):

A lone voice is accompanied by a fingerpicked guitar. Guitar chords follow. This exquisite song is taken from the album "Engelberg", of which most of the lyrics were written by Philippe Djian.



"Des hauts et des bas" (1993):

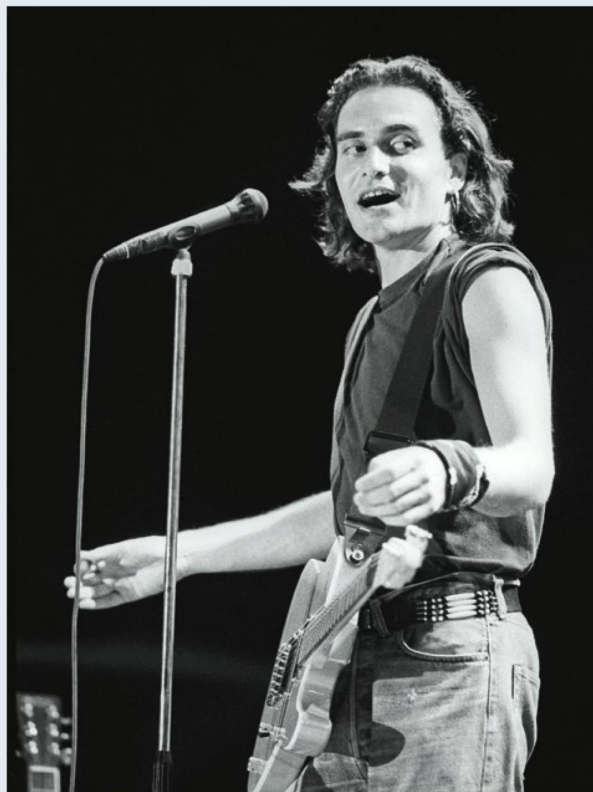
"La pluie venait du nord, le vent passait sous ma porte". (The rain came from the north, the wind blew beneath my door). So begins this famous song, accompanied by a distorted guitar. Eicher launches into one of his trademark refrains with the pounding guitars and drums that he has made his own.



"Gang nid eso" (2019):

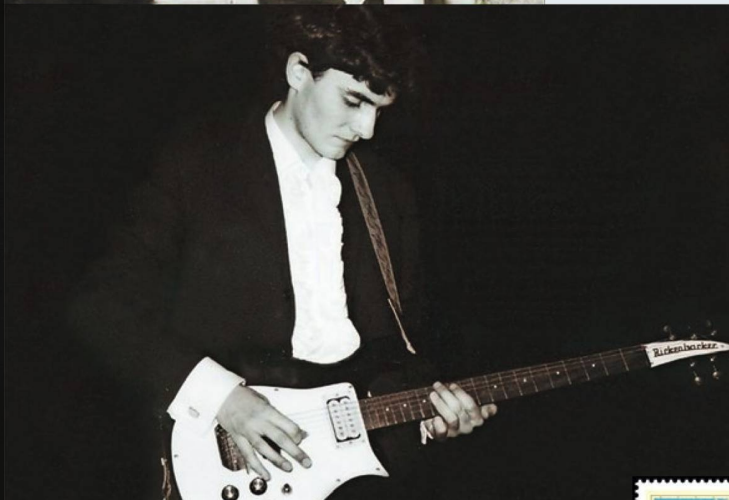
"Wede ga muesch so gang, aber gang nid eso, ds Läbe isch zchurz, für so zga ..." (If you must leave, then go but not like that, life's too short ...). Violins, piano and guitar are the simple backdrop to this beautiful ballad. Lyrics by Martin Suter.

A multilingual artist of many colours



Martin Eicher, Stephan Eicher and Ingrid Berney formed post-punk band Grauzone in 1980.
Unknown photographer

Stephan Eicher at Grauzone's last-ever Zurich concert (1981)
Photo: Arnold Meyer, sams-collection.ch



A young Stephan Eicher at the 1988 Paléo Festival in Nyon Photo: Keystone

During his 40-year career, Stephan Eicher has crossed the linguistic divide with a number of hits in French, despite the language not being his own. Eicher also loves using his native Bernese dialect in francophone settings. In particular, his Paris street version of "Hemmige" during the "Fête de la Musique" – to which the crowd sang along – will live long in the memory. Eicher is the most popular Swiss singer in the French-speaking world.

In France, Eicher has worked with singer Miossec, whom he greatly admires, and with 'le dandy du rock' Alain Bashung – not to mention Serbian film composer and recording art-

ist Goran Bregović, who is a devotee of gypsy culture.

Eicher experimented with sound loops and synthesisers as part of Grauzone, the band he founded with brother Martin. In 2015, during his barren spell, the Swiss toured Europe with nothing but automatic musical instruments for company. In 2019, he played with a brass band. Eicher has also experimented with an array of instruments unusual for a rock singer. For example, he used a cimbalom, a hurdy-gurdy and bagpipes on his album "Carcassonne" – possibly a throw-back to his father's cellar, which overflowed with instruments. (SH)



Eicher performing in Interlaken during his "Backstage Concerto" tour in 1997
Photo: Keystone



The Matterhorn disguised as Africa – Eicher designed his own postage stamp in 2005.
Photo: Keystone



Eicher the maestro – Avo Session, Basel, 2011
Photo: Keystone