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From dilapidated to progressive



JOSEPH JUNG:
"Das Laboratorium des Fortschritts. Die Schweiz im 19. Jahrhundert" (The laboratory of progress. Switzerland in the 19th century), NZZ Libro, Zurich 2019, 676 pages, CHF 49

Switzerland was quite a precarious, dangerous, volatile, backward place in the first half of the 19th century. The country was in the mire and sinking fast. As historian Joseph Jung writes in his latest book, Switzerland was like a "half-dilapidated barn that would have collapsed sooner or later amid the piecemeal repairs".

But then everything suddenly changed. Within a short space of time, a basket case had turned into a "laboratory of progress" (see book title). Joseph Jung, who is honorary professor at the University of Fribourg and longstanding chief historian of large bank Credit Suisse, refers to the triumphant turnaround in Switzerland's fortunes in the second half of the 19th century as the "Swiss miracle". A small, nearly impassable country

became synonymous with tourism, watchmaking and textiles "almost overnight". The Swiss mechanical engineering, electrical, chemical and pharmaceutical industries conquered the world.

Why this dramatic change? Firstly, the constitution of 1848 – at the time the most advanced in Europe – was a "stroke of genius", signalling the birth of the modern federal Swiss state. A small-minded, cumbersome, crisis-prone confederation of cantons gave way to a new political structure that would drive the process of modernisation. Major infrastructure projects – railway construction in particular – played a key role. These were private-sector, not government-run. Significantly, they prioritised the connection of industrial hubs such as Oerlikon, Baden and Kempththal over the important political centres – another master stroke. This connectivity was "crucial" to Switzerland's economic development.

Jung also highlights the role of driven men, especially that of the politician, magnate and railway entrepreneur Alfred Escher. According to Jung, "hoteliers, businessmen, manufacturers, merchants and major capitalists" shaped and led Switzerland to success after 1848. Prominent historians have downplayed Escher's significance in the context of what happened, but Jung sings a veritable paean to the man and his influence.

Even though Jung prefers to draw less attention to the conflicts and problems that riddled what was a tempestuous and economically liberal era, his work is an outstanding, assiduously illustrated and gripping panorama of an important chapter in Swiss history.

JÜRGEN MÜLLER

Accomplished and enthusiastic



GOTTHARD:
«#13»,
Nuclear Blast, 2020

Who can forget the ballad "Heaven"? It was simply inescapable 20 years ago. It played on all the radio stations – and stayed in our heads for months, whether we liked it or not. The catchy number became Gotthard's biggest-ever hit, reaching number one in the Swiss charts.

But the evergreen Gotthard are anything but one-hit wonders. Since the early 1990s, the Ticino band's studio records have been a recurrent fixture at the top of the album charts. Gotthard have also made a name for themselves outside Switzerland and have sold three million albums in total.

With "#13", the band have now carried on where they left off. This is the name of their new album, which was showcased live in March via studio cam due to the coronavirus outbreak. As expected, it is a typical Gotthard album featuring 13 new and predominantly classic hard-rock songs. Its best moments are reminiscent of Deep Purple, while the more mainstream tracks are peak Bon Jovi or Nickelback. "#13" also includes dashes of indie and Southern rock. From opener "Bad News" to uptempo number "Misteria", the lyrics and sound almost descend into cliché but are enjoyable nonetheless.

This is down to the excellent songwriting of guitarist and band leader Leo Leoni, Gotthard's consummate musicianship, and the impeccable hard-rock vocals of Nic Maeder, who succeeded the late Steve Lee almost ten years ago. With their affectionately unironic Abba cover "S.O.S.", the band also reveal considerable eclectic flair.

Amid the accomplished riffs, it is Gotthard's unwavering enthusiasm that shines most brightly, making this, the band's 13th studio album, sound remarkably fresh and unfettered, if not particularly innovative. Anyone who got into Gotthard after listening to "Heaven" will also get their money's worth, with the band pulling off another wonderfully kitschy rock ballad in "Marry You".

MARKO LEHTINEN