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Mani Matter: Berne's Troubadour

I am pretty sure many of you who grew up in Switzerland have heard of Mani Matter! I wonder whether his songs are still performed in Swiss schools. In high school, we sang his songs every week. Not all found this very exciting, as of course we preferred hits from the charts!

Mani Matter was a lawyer and a Swiss dialect songwriter who lived in Berne. Matter's songs, to this day, are very popular in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. Many Swiss artists such as Stephan Eicher, Polo Hofer, Dodo Hug or Züri West have been inspired by him and have performed his songs.

Mani Matter was born on 4th August 1936 in Herzogenbuchsee. His father, Erwin Matter, was a lawyer, while his mother was a Secretary born in the Netherlands. Mani had a sister called Helen who was two years older. The family spoke French, although this was a foreign language for the parents. In January 1960, Mani met Joy Doebeli, a high school teacher of English descent, while skiing in Grindelwald. In 1963, Mani Matter married Joy and together, they had three children: Sibyl, Meret und Ueli. Mani was baptized with the name of Hans Peter. His mother named him Jan, his sister turned it into Nani and the Scouts then gave him the name "Mani". In his professional and academic life, Mani always called himself Hans Peter.

Mani joined the Scout Department of "Patria" in 1944 as a "Wölfl" (Wolf Scout). He later wrote three plays for the Patria entertainment evenings at the Casino in Berne, contributed poems for their bulletin "Hello" until 1965, and played with friends during several entertainment evenings in the legendary "Cabaret".

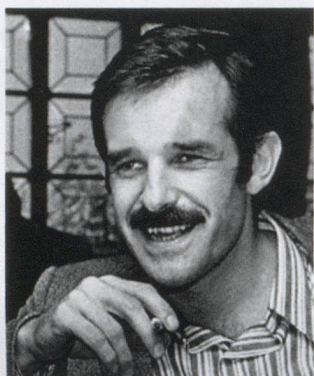
Mani spent his childhood and youth in Berne. There, he attended primary school and the Gymnasium Kirchenfeld, where he passed the Matura in 1955. During his high school years, he wrote his first chanson, "dr Rägewurm" (the earthworm), to the tune of "Ballade des dames du temps jadis" by Georges Brassens.

At the University of Berne, he first studied German language and literature studies before changing to jurisprudence. In 1963, he acquired the Bernese advocate patent after an internship at the District Court of Interlaken. In 1965, he completed a doctorate on "The legitimacy of the municipality to the constitutional complaint". In 1967/68, he worked in Cambridge, England, on his postdoctoral thesis titled "The pluralist theory of the State".

Matter's Bernese German dialect chansons were played on the radio for the first time in 1960. He gave public performances in

1967, initially always with the "Berner Troubadours". He started his first solo program in the autumn of 1971 with a performance at a small theatre in Lucerne. In 1965, he published the first three song texts: The anthology "Ballad", "Lumpeliedli" and "Chansons à la Bernoise" (Benteli-Publishers). In 1966, his first record was released. Some of his songs we only know from later recordings by his friends Jacob Stickelberger and Fritz Widmer. This includes a piece published under the title "Dr Columbus", as well as a joint program, "Kriminalg'schicht" (murder mystery), which they recorded in 1972.

On Friday, November 24, 1972, Mani Matter collided with a truck on his way to a concert in Rapperswil and died on the spot. He was only 36 years old.



Dr Eskimo

kennet dir das g'schichtli scho
vo däm armen eskimo
wo in grönland einisch so
truurig isch um ds läbe cho
är het dank em radio
fröid ar musig übercho
und het tänkt das chani i o
so isch är i ds unglück cho
nämlech är het sech für zwo
fläsche läbertran es no
guet erhaltes cembalo
gchouft und hets i d'höli gno
doch won är fortissimo
gspilt het uf sym cembalo
isch en ysbär ynecho
het ne zwüsche d'chralle gno
kunscht isch geng es risiko
so isch är um ds läbe cho
und dir gseht d'moral dervo
choufet nie es cembalo
süs ch geits öich grad äbeso
wi däm armen eskimo
wo in grönland einisch so
truurig isch um ds läbe chooooo

(Mani Matter: Dr Eskimo, in: Mani Matter, *Us emene lääre Gygechaschte. Berndeutsche Chansons*, Amman Verlag 2003, S. 20-21).

Summary of the Eskimo

This is the song of a poor Eskimo who once upon a time lost his life in Greenland. One day, he was listening to music on the radio and thought: I can do that, too!

He bought a Cembalo for two bottles of cod liver oil and took it into his ice cave. But when he played too loudly (fortissimo), a polar bear came and grabbed him between his claws.

Art is always a risk and you get the moral of the story: Never buy a Cembalo, as otherwise you will suffer the same fate of the Eskimo, who once so sadly lost his life in Greenland!

Text and translation by Alexandra Beskid-Jung

Sources: <http://www.manimatter.ch/>, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mani_Matter



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