

What's so funny about a cowboy in Hamburg

Howard Goldstein

At about the midway point on the bus trip from the Duisburg train station to suburban Moers, the bus stops just before crossing a bridge. Looking out of the front window you'd swear you were in Pittsburgh or Hamilton. For situation on both banks of the Rhine, which flows filthy beneath the bridge is heavy industry; the kind one expects to find in North America (specifically in the steel triangle of the Northeast). The air around was thick with pollutants, almost visible, as sheep grazed on green spots between industrial plants. All at once it was obvious that Germany had become more American than MacDonalds.

The fascination that Germany has with America can be felt in many places, in many ways. In Berlin, a billboard proudly announces that Anheiser Busch (Budweiser) "is now here", complete with cowboys riding

across the Grand Canyon. In Munich, at the movie theatre, there is a commercial in English for a cigarette called "Go West" with a macho cowboy of the urban variety-telling the teutonic crowd to "Go West". In Essen, though my German isn't great, I overhear a child nagging his mother to take him to MacDonalds. Everywhere throughout the country some influence of our friends to the south can be found.

But aside from cowboys and the frontier tradition there is nothing the Germans have a greater fondness for than American music. Jazz, in

particular, finds itself more at home in Germany than it does in parts of the U.S., even though it's thousands of miles from home. It is because of this German fondness for Jazz that I went to the small town of Moers this past June. Each year, for the past ten, this small town has put on what may be the most important of all the European music festivals.

To understand just what the Moers International New Jazz Festival is all about consider Burkhard Hennen its organizer. Hennen, 34, is the owner of a popular nightclub in Moers, "Die Rohre", as well as the fast growing Moers Music record label; yet to see him you'd never know it, as the full-bearded Hennen, dressed in his white overalls, looks more the part of a health food store owner than a promoter of international jazz. While appearances can be deceiving in Hennen's case they are rather valid. His relaxed appearance is quite like the open atmosphere of the festival.

Over a liquid lunch, Hennen stressed that an openness between performer and audience was something he felt was essential if audiences were to escape becoming "merely consumers". To this end he has created what he calls "Portraits and Interaction," which consisted of various performers, ranging from the internationally acclaimed trombonist Gunther Christmann (a frequent visitor to Toronto) to lesser known musicians like bassist Torsten Muller, performing simultaneously in separate rooms throughout the school. The audience could leisurely go from room to room as they wished,

and were invited to ask questions and freely engage the musicians in conversation.

The informal intimate atmosphere made from some fine performances. Most notably the 59-year-old alto player Keizo Inoue from Japan, who captivated the audience with his passionate lyrical playing. It is unfortunate he is not better known on this side of the

Atlantic — the grey balding little man is irresistible.

Also worth mentioning was the fine performance by English vocalist Maggie Nichols. Nichols is one of only a few vocalists who truly uses her voice as an instrument. Her stream of consciousness ramblings, especially one about a depressed woman, were so stunning that one left the room feeling that what was witnessed was more than just great music, but great theatre as well.

The Festival's main stage, located in the spacious park at the town's centre, was quite unique, though sometimes disappointing. The theme of this year's festival was "Free Funk" or "No Wave" music, which seems to be at the heart of Jazz's next revolution. Each of the three nights of the festival was headlined by a group playing some form of this music.

The first night was headlined by the very visual Luther Thomas and Dizzazz. Thomas, a onetime member of St. Louis' influential B.A.G. (Black Artists Group) seems to have found himself a new direction. The show began like a New Orleans funeral — the band spewing out



a contorted circus theme, while a coffin containing Thomas was carried out on stage. Thomas later emerged in red silk top hat, blue suede shoes, and white Dinner Jacket and — lest we forget — blaring alto. The sets borrowed from sources as diverse as Bob Marley, James Brown and the Human Arts Ensemble and were a hit with

the crowd, who could literally be heard miles away banging industrial trash containers for an encore. It seems almost definite that with proper promotion Dizzazz's upcoming album on Moers Music Records, "Yo' Mama", should supply the success needed to give the small company wider recognition.

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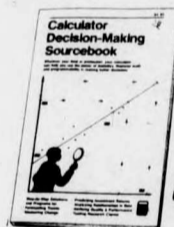
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