

This weekend I'll mostly be listening to... FSK

STUNDE NULL

The joys of the internet allow me to recall the first time I became aware of FSK, a band started in 1980 by four members of the editorial collective of a Munich art-fanzine Mode & Verzweiflung (Fashion & Despair). On 13 August 1986 I was living in a block of flats in East London which still demonstrated structural evidence of the Blitz, listening that evening to John Peel with a few cans of cider and a take away. Peel announced a second session from a band he correctly pronounced Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle, who promptly barged into a Germanic fuzz-guitar stomp I Wish I Could 'Sprechen Sie Deutsch', a song which later became something of a hit among Peel's constituency of skinny white-boy indie kids like myself. This wasn't however some witless comedy combo with half a dozen rubbishy singles in the NME Indie chart: with the last verse sung in obviously exaggerated American accents and with the drum machine approximating marching feet, there was obviously something more nuanced going on. The next track I heard appeared to be an enthusiastic though lugubrious appreciation of Dr Arnold Fanck, the cinematographer who 'invented' the Bergfilm, the type of high altitude epic which reached its commercial apogee in America during the opening frames of The Sound of Music (and indeed FSK were later to consider further the career of a submarine captain from the Austrian alps and his brood of crooning brats, mediated however via John Coltrane).

M WIE MÜNCHEN

bombing, walls, trains and bricks

Though drawn from all over the BRD, the band convened in late '70's Munich, then perhaps the most cosmopolitan and radicalised of the main German cities in the late '60s and '70s. The city's gemütlichkeit borrowed from the Austrians combined with its rowdy beer-hall culture and tourist footfall was an attractive proposition for many Germans arriving in the city from this period onwards. It was also a main railway hub for southern Europe, one of the first cities to attract gastarbeiter from Turkey and Spain, not to mention blow-ins from Austria, South Tyrol and indeed the DDR. The Balkanbusbahnhof also brought people in from Yugoslavia and by the mid-'90s the streets around would become a crepuscular zone populated by the coughing passengers of randomly parked busses with destination boards to hundreds of towns in southern Europe, their redundant No Smoking signs yellowed by nicotine in the torchlight. Where a unified Berlin was to emerge in the '90s as the centre of a rather imported counter-culture, Munich's ascent through the '60s and '70s is tied into the history of groups such as the Amon Düül collective(s) and indeed the madness that was the RAF. Others migrated to Munich after 1968 when events such as the student demonstrations generated more publicity than the more prolonged and politically-driven rioting in Berlin. In Munich there had been two fatalities that Easter: an AP photographer and a student, both killed in a hail of bricks. Older activists arriving in the city had taken it a step further and had been involved in minor firebomb campaigns throughout the BRD aimed at capitalist targets and especially the Springer Press group.

And then came the Olympic Games of 1972 and Black September. And loosely woven through the narrative was the city's relationship with the East and perhaps more significantly, with southern Bohemia. As FSK were archly to imply, the construction of the U3 for the Olympics in the early '70s brought thousands of people into the city, killing its thriving postwar Bohemian underground. The political undercurrent in Munich had always

appeared more Situationist in tone compared to the revolutionary orthodoxies preached elsewhere in Germany. While the Amon Düül collective issued communiqués and released their music to a political audience, the city's creative world had had nothing of the Berliner DADAists or Dessau's Bauhaus and its art music had always been blandly light-classical. For die Junge, the popular quasi-traditional Schlagermusik would be overtaken somewhat by disco in the '70s. In either event, popular culture mostly ignored the music of Amon Düül who provided the soundtrack of this underground in the lead up to the Olympics.

NEUE DEUTSCHE SCHLAGER

I next heard FSK the following winter when Peel broadcast to the Liberties of Dublin a track called Blue Vodel für Herbert Wehner, the combative socialist who, apart from holding the record for getting ejected from the Bundestag, had now seemingly appropriated Pierre Bourdieu's aphorism that youthful anarchists in later life make better democrats. Wehner, a member of the KPD resistance against the Nazis, had returned to kickstart the SPD and became the parliamentary nemeses of Franz Josef Strauss, the right wing head of the Bavarian Christian Democrats, whom indeed the band were to sing about on The Sound of Music (1993). I also heard a re-working of 'Sprechen Sie Deutsch' recorded in Leeds from an EP called American Sector. Now the drums had indeed morphed into jackboots, with the band suspiciously whistling a coda you might have heard on a major Japanese infrastructural project during the war, or indeed from the depths of Steve McQueen's corrugated cooler in Upper Bavaria.

I acquired the early releases on cassette (from the DDR) and by mail order from Hamburg. An EP Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle had appeared in 1980, followed quickly by Teilnehmende Beobachtung. I got Stürmer (1981) later on, a provocative title from a Munich band, meaning 'striker' in the football sense or alternatively the title of the particularly vile Nazi tabloid published from 1923 until the very end. Their early stuff is collected on a double CD Bei Alfred (1995) that points to the Velvets and post-punk as much as the early Mekons, a band who would follow a similar path through to what's loosely called roots music. While suspiciously light on the Krautrock, this music seemed heavily influenced by the local Schlager groups and the showbands who traded in sentimental, rustic lyrics set to traditional rhythms and oomph-pah instrumentation. Regular Cedar Loungeniks¹ should think Declan Nerney² in leatherhosen singing about Saor Éire Action Group³ from the perspective of, say, Grainne Seoige⁴ as a clandestine cadre leader of the Connemara League of Young Communists⁵. Notwithstanding my non-existent German, FSK appeared to be saying something different about the culture of that political Germany we'd see on television: the war, the Wall, the Nazis, the Baader-Meinhofs, Uschi Obermaier's tits and of course the DDR. Yet we were also getting yodelling, a brass section and beautifully distorted surf guitars, with lounge, rockabilly and c/w thrown in at appropriate moments. Crucially, here were Germans singing from perhaps the most Americanised country outside of North America, who, by working the idiom of the American music brought over by the GIs, were facilitating an admittedly skewed lyrical investigation of their own country's recent past. Other explorations into their rock'n'roll counter-heritage were facilitated by Peel with the Fabs also getting the treatment, which naturally enough included a version of Komm gib mir deine Hand. To my ears, their music was very different to that of other groups that emerged from Germany in the early '80s. FSK were further away from Nena's 99 red balloons and even the more Americanised second wave of groups who sung in English at the record company's behest. FSK remained staunchly independent, in the old sense of that word and apart from the odd cover version would continue to sing in German (in Czech and occasionally in French).

TAKE THE SKINHEADS YODELLING

A pair of LPs from the late '80s FSK in Dixieland, and Original Gasman Band, took the group further west from their post-punk roots and the cul-de-sac of the Neue Deutsche Welle. While lighting out for the territory they encountered David Lowery, late of Camper Van Beethoven, who produced the next few albums and joined the band on US and European tours. Thus the group became purveyors of what Lowery subsequently coined Germericana, although the band themselves traded on what they called the Trans-Atlantic Feedback.

This move brought them to south central Texas, where German and Czech were still spoken and where the dance music the emigrants had brought with them had assimilated well into the Tex-Mex tradition. Thomas Meinecke, the band's main lyricist and lap steel feedback virtuoso, was particularly enamoured with this part of the world and he produced 2 CDs of field and archive recordings under the banner Texas-Bohemia, letting the music bleed into the band's lyrical concerns which remained firmly grounded in the political complexities of a united Germany entering a new period of its history. FSK would go on to fully embrace this counter-heritage on 1991's Son of Kraut, which opened with the band's melancholic version of the East German National Anthem, recorded in Richmond VA, a month after that country ceased to exist.

The three albums produced by Lowery, Son of Kraut, The Sound of Music (later the name of Lowery's studio in Richmond) and International (1996) brought on board (late) stalwarts such as Rainer Ptacek and Mark Linkous. These recordings continued Meinecke's lyrical exploration of his country's past and present, throwing in covers of GI songs popular in Germany in the '50s and '60s and providing obscure though entertaining sleeve notes for non-German speakers. The band continued to record sessions for John Peel, their last session taped a few days after the great man died; they've apparently recorded more sessions for the show than any other non-British band.

Meanwhile Chicks on Speed (a Munich electroclash band with an American singer, sharing FSK's art college roots) covered Euro-Trash Girl where Robert Forster (an Australian living in Bavaria) covered Freddy Fender's Sohn, a song ostensibly about 'Roman Catholicism and Latin drugs. In stereo.'

FROM POSTROCK TO TECHNO

Apart from the occasional nod to electronica (and the Japanese disco yodelling of Euro-Trash Girl, hated by the band at the time), there was ostensibly little in the band's past that would point to the next direction they'd take in the late '90s. Explorations 'deeper and deeper into band-oriented electronic music and repetitive sound-structures between post-rock and post-electronica' led to the release of Tel Aviv (1998) and X (2000), mostly instrumentals in the post-rock vein. Yet this change in direction was, in retrospect, only a continuation of the explorations the band had been making in Amerika all along, excavating and disinterring the roots and bones of the music and bringing it all back home.

Back to Munich that is, home of the Munich Machine and for a while in the mid '70s the hauptstadt of Eurodisco, the tinselled bailiwick of a handful of producers, including South Tyrolean Georg 'Giorgio' Moroder. In the early '70s he had

written, produced and performed on a number of hits in the BRD, where soul music was popular due to the ubiquitous cultural force that was American Forces Network radio. In Munich he crafted a sound that sold millions of records all over the world, and laid the foundations of House, Techno and possibly Gabba in the '80s. FSK paid dues to this connection on Lost in Munich the closing track of Tel Aviv, just as they'd name-checked another influence, Roxy Munich on International. With Tel Aviv and X came an obvious nod to the soundscapes fashioned by second division Krautrock groups such as Cluster, Harmonia and NEU! This was a music with little obvious influence derived from the blues or indeed that traditional music that had been brought over from Europe to the new world. The early Detroit Techno scene in particular was more heavily influenced by the second wave of German synth groups, with the clean sounds of bands like Kraftwerk connecting to a local obsession with a post-industrial future. FSK went on to explore this aspect of the Trans-Atlantic Feedback, working extensively with Detroit producer Anthony 'Shake' Shakir. The title of the album they did together in 2004 First Take Then Shake, could suggest something of the band's ongoing engagement with American music, however it's actually a reference to getting the songs down on the first take and passing the tapes to their producer.

FSK WAS NUN?

FSK continue to revise, evolve and confuse. As a comment on their latest Nokturn video suggests: 'um you guys are ok... what laNguage are you guys singiN... anyways we use FSK for „FUTURE SHOCK KREW...." we do graffi... bombiN... walls... trainS... bricks.... basically anythiN....' which perhaps brings the story back to the radical Munich of the '60s and '70s: bombing, walls, trains and bricks.

The band's last album, Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle, their 12th, brings Meinecke's lyrics back to the mix marking a return to guitar-based music with a few beats thrown in for good measure. Michaela Melián continues to pound a Höfner bass (just as McCartney did on the Reeperbahn); the rest of the band weave the music around her beat and all is good in the world again.

Franc Myles is a Dublin-based archaeologist

¹ The Cedar Lounge Revolution <http://cedarlounge.wordpress.com> Irish left wing website with a mix of culture and politics, 'for lefties too stubborn to quit'. This appreciation of FSK originally appeared in the weekly 'This weekend I'll be mostly listening to...' column.

² Musician from the cultural wasteland of the Irish Midlands who sings 'country and Irish', the closest Hibernian approximation to schlagermusik. 'Not alone has he a unique falsetto singing voice, but [he] has a great musical ability, which combined to create a great Declan Nerney sound. Some say that not since the days of the great Duane Eddy, one of Declan's heroes, has anyone come along with that great twanging sound'. He has recently recorded a cover of Johnny Paycheck's Take This Job and Shove It. <http://www.declannerney.com/biography.htm>

³ Paramilitary group with Trotskyite and Republican membership active between 1967-1975, specialising in bank jobs. Often lazily compared to the Rote Armee Fraktion.

⁴ Wholesomely voluptuous Gaelic-speaking Irish television personality, currently not believed to be involved in subversive political activity.

⁵ This political formation has never existed.