

Womp-bomp-a-loom-op-a-womp-bam-boom

By Jörg Foth

On the phone, Thomas Plenert asked me, “Hi Jörg. What’s happening?” He sounded as if he were just around the corner, but he was calling from the USA, where he was on tour with Helke Misselwitz, his wife Gudrun and their film *Winter Adé*. It was a little before 10 p.m., and I didn’t know what he was referring to.

“Over here, the Americans are saying the Wall is open.” “No, no,” I said. “Prussians don’t shoot as fast as the tabloids print.”

I told him about Schabowski’s pants’ pocket—how he had pulled a scrap of paper out of it shortly before 7:30 p.m., then mumbled what he thought might be written on it, only confirming the statement when a journalist asked: Leaving the country, without a statement of purpose, is effective immediately, everywhere . . . even in Berlin. And, I told Tommy, the civil rights activist Sebastian Pflugbeil had just made the point on the 9:45 p.m. ZDF [West German] news that the new travel regulations only applied to citizens who had wanted to leave the GDR for a long time, not to mere tourists. It was probably just too embarrassing for the GDR to have its citizens fleeing the country by way of Budapest and Prague.

Tommy was reassured that he wasn’t missing out on anything important. My wife and I went to sleep and then to work the next day. But before we got up on Friday the 10th, the telephone rang again. Our friend Petra—who had lived above us and left the country a year ago—asked us through a lot of static why we weren’t on the Ku’damm dancing. Apparently all hell had broken loose there. My wife and I took care of the kids and drove to work, just like every other day. We had an evening appointment at the Gethsemane Church, to become members of the Prenzlauer Berg chapter of *Neues Forum* at their founding meeting there.

Whoever didn’t own a car, lived in [East] Berlin and worked in Babelsberg [to the southwest of West Berlin] had to ride the double-decker train nicknamed *Sputnik*, that orbited around West Berlin. It took two hours in the morning and then another two in the evening, or even three during the winter or a storm. Driving through West Berlin would have taken only half as long as driving around it—meaning only two hours in the car instead of four. If you didn’t count the weekends, holidays and vacation time in a 365-day year, that left you with 230 working days with two hours of unnecessary travel time per day, for a total of 460 hours per year. Thus, the Berlin DEFA feature film crew had to travel an extra nineteen full days of each year on account of the Cold War. But I liked the view from “Sputnik” of the irrigated fields south of Berlin. Flowers, ducks, deer, foxes; rough, prickly nature changing in all kinds of weather, every hour of every day, week after week, year after year, again and again.

When I was a child, I listened to a small transistor radio called *Sternchen*. With a handful of friends, I listened to a program Monday to Friday from 5-6 p.m. In the 1960s, the right music—meaning pure rock’n’roll—could only be heard at the fair and on AFN [American Forces Network]—that is, at the stomping grounds of the *Halbstarcken* and on the USA’s Berlin frequency between 5 and 6 p.m. We always ran out of school on Wednesdays so we could still make it after the youth group’s “Pioneer Afternoon” meeting. Then in 1964, I got a *Stern 4* portable radio as a *Jugendweihe* [initiation ceremony] present, which had 2 antennae and took 6 batteries. It was heavy, loud and divine, sitting on my arm as I carried it through the streets for

hours. The craziest thing was that you couldn't buy this music, nor could you read about it in the magazines, which meant you didn't know exactly what certain songs were called or how to spell the singers' names.

I had a Scottish penpal—Kathleen Rennie at 15 Hyslop Crescent, Colmonell, Ayrshire. She would write down the Top Ten list from her radio station for me and even sent me her Beano Book, which somehow made it through customs. I sent her whatever we had available. One time, I got a package with a 45rpm single of Bud Ashton & His Group, Robot / Foot Tapper and a confiscation report. East German customs had confiscated Little Children by Billy J. Kramer & The Dakotas. I finally bought the CD in 1992.

Rock'n'roll was like an unreachable siren's song, which had bewitched me for always and forever. Those who followed it would be shot at the Wall, or at least socially and professionally ruined. "Rivets in studded jeans unwelcome!" was posted at some dancehalls—often where "Swing dancing forbidden!" had stood twenty years earlier. But my songs were so restless, so light-hearted, fun-loving, cocky and defiant. Not to listen to, but to move to.

Thank you, Chuck Willis, for "Don't Hang up My Rock'n'Roll Shoes."

Thank you, Thurston Harris, for "Little Bitty Pretty One."

Thank you, Larry Williams, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Drifters, Coasters and AFN.

We had nothing that even came close to AFN's "Frolic at Five" show. Much later, the British Forces Broadcasting Services started to play Liverpool kids' songs from from 6 to 7 p.m. But West Berlin stations might as well have joined the 1965 East German ban on "beat" music; in September 1965, the "Tuesday Evening Hit Parade Music Box" on SFB [Radio Free Berlin] still refused to play "I Can't Get No Satisfaction," despite popular demand. The host explained they would wait for the Rolling Stones' next release and then the editorial board would decide whether or not the band could be broadcast.

So I sent a protest letter, without a return address, about this to the weekly pseudonymous address announced on SFB. Then, that same evening, I started listening to Radio Luxemburg on the *Stern 4* beside my bed. It was pretty grim, from a receiver-technology angle, because the station faded in and out—sometimes disappearing entirely—and the songs themselves had to glimmer through the hiss. The darkness of the evening, being alone in bed with this static-filled sound, made the music all the more unreachable, but all the more powerful. When Radio Luxemburg broadcast Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues," it hit me like a punch. I had liked his earlier stuff, but with this song he leapt into the circle of my most sacred rock'n'rollers.

In 1967, Pete Seeger visited East Berlin's Volksbühne theater. He sang in a plaid shirt, baggy flannel pants and black work boots and played a somewhat rundown guitar. We had been—and were still—excited when he suddenly sang "Peat Bog Soldiers" in German. It was odd to have someone from our music scene, from real life, sing a song from our flag ceremony, where it had already dissolved into meaningless phrases. After the concert, we waited at the stage exit on Linienstrasse. I asked Pete Seeger to autograph the cuff of my parka and gave him a letter to take to Bob Dylan; I had been very worried about him since his motorcycle accident. In this letter, I told Bob Dylan how important he was to us in the GDR and how it would be good for him to play here once. Pete Seeger signed my sleeve, but then reacted very angrily to my love letter to Bob Dylan. He refused to take it with him and said that Bob Dylan had gone crazy.

At home, I wrote a letter to Pete Seeger, in which I again explained the urgency of my letter to Bob Dylan. I included the letter to Bob Dylan in the envelope and then gave them both to a girl named Angela, who was one class above me and was apprenticing as a reception desk secretary at the Hotel Berolina. She had told me Pete Seeger was staying there overnight and said she'd put my double-letter into his box. Angela was later expelled from school for allegedly having written to the RIAS radio station in West Berlin. Back then I didn't know if I had succeeded in reaching Pete Seeger's hotel mailbox; but I had the great feeling that I had done everything possible for Bob Dylan. And when—to our surprise—he played at the field in front of the East Berlin Soviet memorial at Treptow, on September 17, 1987, I wept many tears and knew that, even though it took twenty years, my letter had worked.

This unbelievable life between two worlds came to an end on November 9, 1989. The unreachable siren songs of my childhood are now alphabetically sorted in music stores and available online. In the 1990s, I searched for, hunted for and found all the really catchy songs and one-hit wonders that were stuck in my head: from “You Can't Sit Down” by the Dovells, to “Stranded in the Jungle” by the Cadets; from “Bop-A-Lena” by Ronnie Self, to “Walk Right in” by the Rooftop Singers. There is nothing more to be done; but the longing, the inaccessibility of a world that only existed in the air, in the ether and in your ear was more mysterious and pretty.

On November 10, 1989, I met up with my wife after work at the Gethsemane Church, where the founding of the Prenzlauer Berg *Neues Forum* was lost in the sensational events of the previous night and coming days. It was to prove unnecessary, in light of the greatest domestic German chess move ever, the Wall-opening-coup of the East German government. No longer could something be concluded within one's own borders. We made a date with our West Berlin friends, Thomas and Gabriele Draeger, for Sunday. We planned on crossing over therewith both our daughters, Lola and Sarah—not through an existing border checkpoint, but rather through one of the new, wild, recently broken holes in the Wall. We went to Oderberger Strasse, because it was the closest: got in line in front of the hole in the Wall; got a stamp on a flap clipped to the back of our passports, next to a People's Police truck; climbed over fallen concrete slabs into no man's land; looked to the left and right along the death strip and barriers with our daughters; and then just stood there, hugging and kissing each other for a long time.

In 1993, I received some 8mm reels of home movies from the Klohn family—a part of my wife's family that had fled from the East in July 1961—so that I might consider using parts in my later film, *Prenzlauer Berg Walzer*. Once she had arrived in the West, Aunt Lilo had climbed the tourist platform on Bernauer Strasse and taken footage of the death strip across from Oderberger Strasse. In 1961, with a long, slow pan, Lilo had filmed the exact spot where my wife and I had kissed on November 12, 1989.

After the Wall opened, virtually all of East Berlin was hauling back boxes of laundry detergent, shopping bags and stereo systems, since there was "welcome money" to be had in the West: 100 marks for everyone—for every baby, every child, every woman, every man, every senior citizen; 17 million times 100. Anyone in the East who later reported their identity card missing and got a new one, or who had a passport at their disposal in addition to their card, could get 100 marks again, or even two more times. So it was more like 30 million times 100.

Suddenly—or coincidentally—everything in the stores cost exactly 99 marks. The fall of the Wall was a magical moment for shelf warmers and discontinued merchandise. There had already been

welcome money before 1989, if you were from the East and allowed to attend a West German relative's birthday or other family occasion; that way, East German citizens could act a little more independent and fulfill their desires, without burdening their relatives in the West. But in 1989, the welcome money became a kind of "cash for clunkers" program for your own life; whoever was ready to forget their previous life would get 100 marks for a new one.

For about a year, sample packages of margarine, weekly newspapers and sanitary napkins were hung on the handles of our apartment doors. West German products were prostituting themselves in the East German stairwells. They courted each GDR citizen as a future customer. After forty years of free social support and services plus boredom in the East, the majority chose the still-predictable risks of life in the West plus prosperity. But more people than remember it today had tried to deal with the GDR at some point, somewhere, somehow, instead of prematurely or thoughtlessly rejecting it. But it didn't make any sense at any point in time.

In January 1990, GDR passports were being given out at the Immanuelkirchstrasse police station, for everybody. We went there, got in line and learned while waiting that you could apply for a one-year passport for 10 marks, or a ten-year passport for 30 marks. Without a second's hesitation, we applied for ten-year East German passports, which we did indeed use to travel to as many countries as possible, for as long as it was possible to use East German passports. . . meaning, until 1995.

The Wall was built in 1961 because too many people wanted to go to the West from the East. It was opened in 1989 because too many people still wanted to go to the West from the East. And now, twenty years later, the exodus from the East to the West is bigger than ever.

Director Jörg Foth wrote this piece as part of the DEFA Memories series entitled "'89 – '09: We Remember."