FRIEDENSNOTE NR. 18

A Questionable Myth

With his song „I can't write left-handed", Bill Withers gave a voice to war veterans who, in youthful naivety, let themselves be sent to the front and returned maimed.

No one simply shrugs off war. Returning from the front, former soldiers often seem like changed people. The experience of lethal violence leaves its mark inwardly and outwardly: scars that will never fully heal. Young people in particular, who let themselves be swept up in enthusiasm for service under arms and then marched off into the combat zones, had no idea at first what was happening to them. After their return they are, it is true, „richer" for this terrible experience, but through wounds of the soul and of the body they are markedly poorer in quality of life. Bill Withers lent these people his voice.

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SONG	I Can't Write Left-Handed
PERFORMER	Bill Withers

I must have been 15 or 16 years old when my cousin, eight years my senior, proudly showed off the loudspeakers he had just bought. The 901 by Bose. A legendary speaker that caused a sensation in the hi-fi world of the day. I had to sit down on a specially positioned chair, because that was where the listening experience was greatest. From the LP that my cousin then put on I knew neither the name of the musician nor his music. It was Bill Withers. The song was called „Harlem“, it is still one of my favourite songs and – to cut a long story short: back then it blew me away.

On the one hand the sound of the speakers – no, I do not have an endorsement deal with Bose – and on the other hand this music. The intensity of the voice, the groove, the bass lick that moves chromatically upward in semitone steps. A track that – although pressed as the A-side – flopped rather badly. The B-side „Ain't no sunshine“, by contrast, became a mega-hit. Further hits followed. Such as „Just the two of us“, „Lovely day“ and „Lean on me“, which during the whole Corona affair became something like an unofficial anthem for care workers in the USA.

The song this piece is about did not storm the charts, but it certainly moved many hearts. It is called „I can't write left-handed“ and came into being under the influence of the Vietnam War. Withers reflects on young people who – like him when he was young – cared little about politics. Who did not ask many questions but went off to war when the word was „go“. It is one such young man, whom Bill Withers saw on the street, that this song is about. The young man lost his right arm in the war, and Withers tries to put himself in his place. That this young man might say he cannot write with his left hand, and therefore asks him to write a letter to his mother. Who in turn is to ask the family lawyer to obtain a deferment from military service for the younger brother. And that Reverend Harris should pray for him.

Bill Withers said of himself: „I am no virtuoso, but at least I managed to write songs that people could identify with.“ With „I can't write left-handed“ he achieved a composition that is less a song than a piece of musical prose, one that makes the consequences of war vivid through a single personal fate. Not abstractly, but confrontationally. In this case the Vietnam War. Which – incidentally – was one of the reasons for the founding of the German Greens.

A party that from the very beginning always presented itself as a peace party too. Tempi passati – for today it is the worst warmongers who set the tone among the Greens. And on top of that they field,

in Annalena Baerbock, a federal foreign minister who wants to ruin Russia, and in Robert Habeck a federal minister for economic affairs who, though he does not know what an insolvency is, is at least not afraid of the Third World War.

Such a monstrous and stupid statement would surely never have passed the lips of a Bill Withers. Any more than it would those of the author of these lines.

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Uli Masuth ist Kabarettist, Komponist, Klavierist und Wahl-Weimarer. Er hat Musik und Germanistik studiert und war Gründer und Mitglied verschiedener Bands und Musik-Projekte. Masuth war Gewinner des Ruhrrock Festivals NRW, des WDR- Wettbewerbs „Stadtmusik“ in der Sparte Jazz, des Kabarettpreises der Obernburger Kochsmühle und des Reinheimer „Satire-Löwen“ und hat Auftragskompositionen für Bühnenstücke geschrieben.

Seit 1999 ist Masuth schwerpunktmäßig als Kabarettist tätig. Zurzeit mit seinem politisch stets aktualisierten Programm „LÜGEN und andere WAHRHEITEN“.

Website: kabarett-musik.de

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