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Musical Memorials

Gute Antikriegslieder sterben leider nie – sie warten auf den nächsten Krieg.

Our history books like to tell of generals, commanders, kings and presidents who wage, win and lose wars. But they are not the ones who crouch wretchedly in the trenches and have their limbs torn away by an enemy bullet. The fate of the „Johnnys“, who are lured in with drums and promises and then broken in the military and burned up in wars, is the province not of historiography but of art.

One such work of art is the timeless anti-war song „Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye“, which Nachdenkseiten editor Jens Berger presents in the haunting version by Benjamin Luxon and Bill Crofut.

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SONG	Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye
PERFORMER	Dropkick Murphys
ALBUM	The Meanest of Times, 2007

The story is quickly told. An Irish soldier returns from one of the British Army's colonial wars to his bride. But what returns is really nothing more than a shell. For what comes back is barely recognizable: no arms, no legs, the eyes extinguished, „an eyeless, boneless, chickenless egg", someone who has to be set out at the roadside with a begging bowl. The refrain is as plain as it is devastating: „Johnny, I hardly knew ye." Johnny, I hardly recognized you. There is really nothing more one needs to say about war.

▶ www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/T-kBZjoWGNg?rel=0

Legend has it that this song was already being sung in the 18th century by Ireland's rural population as a defiant response to the British Army's recruitment efforts. Historically, however, this cannot be proven. The „true" story of the song is more interesting still. The song's music comes from the American war song „When Johnny Comes Marching Home, written in 1863 — a rousing recruitment number, as we would call it today, with which both sides in the American Civil War recruited volunteers for the army. Its lyrics tell of how the soldier Johnny returns proudly from the war and is admired and cheered for his heroic deeds. Film buffs will know the song above all from Kubrick's masterpiece „Dr. Strangelove", in which it plays during the iconic scene where the Americans drop the first atomic bomb on Russia.

From this pathos-drenched war song, the English cabaret artist Joseph B. Geoghegan fashioned a macabre grotesque in 1867 for the then-popular music halls.

His lyrics, too, are about a „Johnny" — only that his Johnny does not return gloriously from the war to be admired, but is mourned and mocked by his bride as a broken, disfigured human wreck.

Over the years, the bitter music-hall piece became one of the most haunting anti-war songs of all. It achieved worldwide fame in 1961 in the version by the Clancy Brothers, which became an early anthem of the American anti-war movement. As a song against the Vietnam War, it was later adapted by Joan Baez. The best-known contemporary version is probably the musically crashing interpretation by the Dropkick Murphys.

All of these interpretations would undoubtedly deserve an article of their own. For me, however, the version that towers above all others is the 1986 interpretation of the song by the British opera

singer Benjamin Luxon, accompanied by the American folk musician Bill Crofut on the banjo.

Most versions of the song rely on the energy of Irish folk or on the rousing refrain. Luxon and Crofut take a completely different path. Benjamin Luxon does not sing. He narrates. His dark baritone voice possesses an overwhelming force. Every line sounds as if it were bending under its own weight. Where other singers seek pathos, Luxon finds humanity and emotion. With each line, the bride he embodies sinks deeper into the horror that opens up before her in the form of the returning Johnny. Lament turns into despair. Despair turns into rage and finally into resignation. That is war.

Bill Crofut's spare accompaniment reinforces this impression. No overloaded instrumentation, no dramatic effects. Just enough space for every word to take effect. This effect is heightened by the minimalist stage set and the sparing lighting. The result is an oppressive intimacy of a kind found in hardly any other musical performance. The music never pushes itself in front of the text — it carries it. And in the background, the „drumming" of the banjo keeps reminding us what this is about: they are drumming for war. They are drumming to come for you, too. The cheerful hurrah of recruitment, only that it is now sung over a man with no arms and no legs. The song lets the drum keep drumming while showing what it has wrought. Anti-war art has never produced a more perfidious, a more precise construction.

Imagine the song in a different interpretation: the same song, high-gloss polished, with swelling strings and a choir in the finale. It would be bearable. It would be „beautiful". And that is exactly what it must not be. Luxon and Crofut deny us consolation. They let the „chickenless egg" stand naked in the room, just as the pacifist Ernst Friedrich, in 1924, in his photo book „Krieg dem Kriege!, laid the shot-up faces of those maimed in the World War naked on the pages — with no caption, no interpretation, no soft focus. One can close one's eyes to both. But afterwards one cannot say one did not see it.

Modern war propaganda works with satellite images, front lines and percentages. It talks about defense spending, weapons systems and alliance commitments. The individual fate disappears behind abstract terms.

„Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye" does exactly the opposite. It reduces war to a single human being.

And suddenly everything becomes visible.

Perhaps that is why this song has lost none of its power even after more than 150 years. It reminds us that behind every strategic debate there stands, sooner or later, a Johnny. One who goes away. And one whom — if at all — we can barely recognize anymore.

That makes the song more topical than ever. Today, too, we hear the „Drums and Guns“; today, too, in Germany the Johnnys — who here are more likely called Kevin or Mohammed — are recruited for the army with pathos and baseless promises. Will they, too, one day return to their loved ones broken and disfigured?

The version by Joan Baez has the right answer to that. Unlike the original, this version ends with the lines:

> *„They’re rolling out the guns again, hurroo, hurroo*
>
> *They’re rolling out the guns again, hurroo, hurroo*
>
> *They’re rolling out the guns again*
>
> *But they won’t take back our sons again*
>
> *No they’ll never take back our sons again*
>
> *Johnny, I’m swearing to ye.“*

And this vow should not go unheard.

LISTEN & WATCH

FIRST PUBLISHED ON MANOVA

www.manova.news/artikel/musikalische-mahnmale

THE SONG IN ITS ORIGINAL · YOUTUBE

www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0CDIwPtgrg

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Jens Berger ist Chefredakteur der NachDenkSeiten. Er hat Volkswirtschaft studiert und ist politischer Blogger der ersten Stunde. Er befasst sich vor allem mit sozial-, wirtschafts- und finanzpolitischen Themen.

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