

JUERGEN POTH: BALLADEER, SINGER/SONGWRITER FROM THE ODENWALD

„Tradition is not to preserve the ashes but to pass on the flame“

Folklore in Germany, Ireland, USA and Sweden

Performing and writing folksongs is not only singing about regional history or the hardships of living, but it is a form of building bridges. Bridges erected from sounds, sheet music and lyrics, showing how similar the lives of people always have been. We are not only neighbours on the same continent. We are human beings with the same emotions, delights and fears, sorrows and hopes. But we also have been neighbours who lived in conflicts and had been at war with one another. Folk music obliterates these historic trenches, while it emphasizes the cultural diversity and relationship in the same process. The differences in the lyrics, be it the official language, the language of minorities or dialects, highlight the fascination linked to this form of music. Everybody can join in, in his or her own way, without fearing a comparison with commercial products of the music industry. This is the people's own form of art, genuine and of local uniqueness. I deeply wish us Europeans, that we may refer this art of folk music and our regional language to our children, that they might build new and stable bridges. I hope that as a balladeer I will be able to contribute to passing on the flame.

The “Cuckoo”?

Juergen A. Poth, stage name „De Guggugg“, born 1958 (really that age?), married, three children, a big garden, a house in the village of Spachbruecken, six guitars, working with a water supplying company near Frankfurt, Ireland and Sweden enthusiast, loves mediterranean food and spicy sausages (and everything containing garlic), collector of German folksongs from the last five centuries. Founder of the Celtic Folk Band “Ceol na gCuach“, „The Cuckoo's Music“, and fan of the “Fleadh na gCuach” in Kinvara, Co. Galway, Ireland.

The people of my village have been nicknamed the “cuckoos”. Calling them by this name led into hefty rows between them and young lads of neighbouring villages. The reason for the creation of this nickname had been forgotten:

In the 19th and 20th century Spachbruecken was famous for its ceramic products. The potteries delivered their goods to the Grandduke of Hesse and as far as the court of the Russian Tzar. From the scrap of the clay they made small flutes which could imitate a cuckoo's call. Hearing this call was announcing the Spachbruecken potter selling his crocks, and was later transferred to all inhabitants of our village.

You will rather hear another story: Once upon a time a farmer from a neighbouring town stopped in a guesthouse in Spachbruecken. Being hungry, he ordered a baked chicken. The landlord didn't want to kill his only rooster, so he decided to serve a cuckoo instead he had shot this very morning. The farmer enjoyed the tasty meal and complimented the guesthouse and its cuisine. But the landlord could not keep the secret of his trick, and so very soon everybody was talking about the cuckoo served in Spachbruecken.

Stories and Songs in English

With “Ceol na gCuach” I have had the chance to perform Irish, American, Australian and Scottish folk music, but also German songs. The band’s fast growing repertoire of ballads, pub-songs and instrumentals offers the possibility to arrange the right mixture for every audience. And most of these songs have corresponding tunes in countries all over the world. As solo entertainer I assort these folk songs and tell stories and little anecdotes about them.

Stories and Songs in German

Very interesting is an excursion into the history of origins of German Folk songs, introducing the audience into ancient attitudes, language, customs and humour. People abroad like to join in singing songs also in foreign languages - they always get a little encouragement by leaflets with the song texts. And they like to hear that tunes of their nation’s songwriters have been translated into German – and vice versa!

This is also the place to say “thank you” to songwriters all over the world, who allowed me to use their music to write my own lyrics to these beautiful melodies, mostly in Odenwald dialect. Thank you, Tommy Sands, Ben Sands and Colum Sands in Northern Ireland, Bill Staines and Allan Taylor in U.S.A., Pat McKernan in Australia or Pat Cooksey from Ireland.

”Farewell my Home” (“Leb wohl, mein Land”)

“Farewell my Home” is part of my international folk activities. Every country has its own emigration history. Songs (in English, German and Swedish) and stories (in English) about German, Irish, Jewish and Swedish emigrants will accompany the audience into the hardships of 19th and 20th century living conditions, giving them an emotional insight into people’s motives to leave their country. My songs will retrace the different reasons for the emigrant’s decision to escape a steady pressure. Political or religious persecution, poverty and lack of work in a fast growing society pushed people to the harbours of Europe, where the ships with destination “New World” were waiting for them. In these desperate situations the poor peasants and craftsmen were hoping that the promises of a Garden of Eden will come true. Sometimes it did come true, more often they faced the same living conditions they were trying to get away from.

I will sing about the tearful parting from friends and relatives, the dangerous crossing on rivers and seas, the difficulties of a happy beginning, the joy of having left all restrictions and pressures, and the homesickness for the countryside one left behind. In telling stories about these songs of emigration, I will get the audience closer to history, lyrics and melodies of the songs. I provide the listeners with leaflets containing the lyrics, so they might join in singing with me.

Several places with a relationship to the history of emigration offer a stage for my stories and songs, mostly museums or historical societies. My full-length programme surprises the audience, in addition, with little snacks of dishes the emigrants were used to eat: dried fruits, potatoes, smoked and salted meat, or rusk bread.

”No more War!” (“Nie wieder Krieg”)

In August 1914 the world was on the brink of self-destruction. Emperors and politicians excluded all rationality and sent their armies into mutual extinction. With the help of God! Willing to die for the fatherland.

In this historical programme I try to describe the life of recruits and soldiers in the hell of artillery fire, mud, barbed wire, blood and death. The farmers and craftsmen left their families in the hope to be back at Christmas. If they ever came home, it was four years later. Women and children were facing a hard life, trying to survive food reductions, unemployment and the fear for the husbands, brothers and fathers in the trenches. Letters were exchanged, gift parcels were sent, in hope of a fast end of all this slaughtering.

And songs were sung! Songs of courage and chivalry, the joy of fighting, laughing at the enemy. But with the reality of injuries and death the soldiers realized the absurdity and insanity of their situation, and anti-war songs were composed. Songs had been censored, on the other hand songs became a tool of propaganda. After the war an enduring peace was the hope of songwriters and poets, but 25 years later the self-destruction would be continued ...

I will sing about life and survival in war-times with the authentic words of the soldiers and their families. All Europeans shared similar hopes of peace, and similar words in the songs. I will get the audience closer to history, lyrics and melodies of the songs. Again, I will provide leaflets containing the lyrics. And hopefully, everybody will be convinced to strive for a prevailing peace. For the next attempt on self-destruction will be final!

Jewish Neighbours – Let’s talk TACHELES

In my new project I will write songs about the everyday life of Jews within a Christian surrounding in German towns and villages. The focus is “normality”, because the atrocities and harassments our Jewish neighbours had to suffer are only one side of the medal. The other is the positive stimulus Jewish life had on our social life, arts, sports, music, poetry, language, science, politics, etc. In 2021 we will be able to celebrate 1700 years of Jewish life in Germany, when the first community settled in Roman Cologne.

I will do a lot of research to be able to tell stories about these neighbours, and to bring light into a living together, before it was destroyed. But there is hope that we can esteem this influence someday, reflect about ourselves and use it to take responsibility for a life in freedom.

Whatever the agenda will be – We will have a lot of fun and entertainment with handmade music, living history and witty story telling!

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