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Ernst Busch, Rio Reiser and Gerhard Gundermann: Examples of Proletarian Narrative Role-Play in German Political Song

This article will look at three contrasting examples of proletarian narratives in German political singers of the twentieth century. Starting with Ernst Busch, the singer of Brecht and Eisler's *Kampflieder* in the Weimar Republic, it will go on to deal with Rio Reiser of the West Berlin rock group Ton Steine Scherben in the early 1970s, and finally look at Gerhard Gundermann, who emerged from the FDJ *Singebewegung* to become a critical singer/songwriter in the final years of the GDR. In all cases the particular narrative role-play adopted by the singer will be seen to form a medium of identification between performer and audience.

Previous German political song research has dealt with the *Rollengedicht* (or dramatic monologue) pioneered by writers such as Walter Mehring, Kurt Tucholsky or Joachim Ringelnatz in the literary cabarets of the Weimar Republic.¹ This was a satirical form of narrative role-play by which the singer assumes an identifiable persona, impersonating the language, mannerisms, and characteristics of known social types. A later example is Franz Josef Degenhardt, who mocked conventional figures of the establishment in his counter-cultural songs of the 1960s and early 1970s. Typical songs were *vatis argumente* (1968)² in which Degenhardt parodies the rants of the reactionary father in dialogue with his questioning son, or *Befragung eines Kriegsdienstverweigerers* (1972)³ which lampoons the hypocritical rhetoric of the judge faced with a conscientious objector. Narrative role-play in song, however, is not always ironic, and also functions as a means of direct identification with political stances. Examples in twentieth century political song include Ernst Busch's personification of the proletarian worker in his *Kampflieder*, Konstantin Wecker's identification with anarchy and hedonism in his songs

of the 1970s and 1980s, Wolf Biermann's evocation of the spirit of vagabond poet Francois Villon in his critical GDR *Spottlieder*, or Gerhard Gundermann's embodiment of the disenfranchised worker in post-unification East Germany. These role-plays are mostly non-ironic and equate the singer with the role itself. In the case of Rio Reiser from Ton Steine Scherben, however, who casts himself as a delinquent squatter and militant urban anarchist, one sees a blurring of these two approaches. With regard to this ambiguity it is useful to examine Rio Reiser's role-play in terms of pop sociologist Simon Frith's definition of the pop singer narrative:

The [pop] singer is playing a part, and what is involved is neither [...] the equation of role and performer as in chanson [...] nor critical commentary (as in German theater song) but, rather, an exercise in style, an ironic — or cynical — presentation of character *as style*.⁴

Rather than falling into either of Frith's blunt categories, this article will argue that Rio Reiser's narrative role-play straddled both these stances, embodying a playful presentation of "character as style" combined with an authentic critical voice. This will be seen to have stemmed from Ton Steine Scherben's roots in agitprop theatre which spawned an awareness of the aspect of "play". This in turn produced an element of ambiguity and fun, which, as we will see, did not rest comfortably with the dogmatic views of anarchist politicians in Berlin Kreuzberg. This ambiguity is one aspect of the perennial tension between art and politics which *Liedermacher* and rock artists face when active in social and political movements.

The article will conclude with a look at the proletarian GDR singer Gerhard Gundermann. He, too, had a theatrical background, having been a member of the Hoyerswerda *Liedertheater* group Brigade Feuerstein in the late 1970s and early 1980s

before embarking on a solo career. Gundermann, who simultaneously worked as an excavator driver in a mine, essentially played himself in his songs, reflecting the voice of the critically-minded worker who saw through the lies, but was nonetheless proud of the GDR's socialist ideals. In the post-unification years before his premature death in 1998 he became the musical mouthpiece for thousands of culturally disaffected East Germans.

To set the context for the agit-rock of *Ton Steine Scherben* in the counter-cultural scene of West Berlin and the GDR political song milieu which Gundermann inhabited, it is useful to return to the Weimar Republic, where many of the theories of proletarian performance art were conceived. In the years following the First World War the rise of mass culture brought with it the “blurring of the distinctions between high and low, art and commerce, the sacred and the profane”.⁵ This supported Walter Benjamin's claim of the democratic potential of mass technology.⁶ As Frith writes: “In short, the rise of ‘mass culture’ meant new forms of social activity, new ways of using aesthetic experience to define social identity”.⁷ Echoing Benjamin, Hanns Eisler saw the potential of the mass-orientated *Kampflied* to resolve the opposition between consumer and producer of music.⁸ Eisler used sophisticated compositional techniques, but at the same time subverted classical music's notions of hierarchy, scholarship, and the rituals it constructs around the musical event. In place of this, he promoted collectivity: the wall between artist and audience should be pulled down; everyone should participate.

It is clear that the *Kampflied* was not devised in the first instance as a commercial commodity, but rather as a weapon in the class struggle. But whereas modern protest pop, according to Frith, tends to contain slogans (for instance, Springsteen's *Born in the USA*)⁹ as opposed to developing an intellectual argument, Brecht and Eisler's *Kampflied* attempted to have *both*: the philosophical arguments were presented (albeit simplified for the genre) alongside highly singable refrains such as “Vorwärts und nicht vergessen” in

Solidaritätslied (1931) or “Drum links zwei drei” in *Einheitsfrontlied* (1934). The latter presents the problem of proletarian hunger in the first verse and uses the chorus to present the solution: the worker should not sit around, but should take action by joining the workers’ united front to defeat capitalism: “Drum links, zwei, drei! / Drum links, zwei, drei! / Wo dein Platz, Genosse, ist! / Reih dich ein in die Arbeitereinheitsfront / Weil du auch ein Arbeiter bist”.¹⁰

The performance posture of Brecht and Eisler’s favoured singer Ernst Busch – in embodying the antithesis of the bourgeois conductor or “Lied” singer with his unaffected proletarian style – further enhanced the popular image of the *Kampflied*. On this level we can see that Brecht and Eisler clearly understood the communicative dynamics of pop music. According to Frith, “the issue in lyrical analysis is not words, but words in performance. Lyrics, that is, are a form of rhetoric or oratory; we have to treat them in terms of the persuasive relationship set up between singer and listener”.¹¹ With his film-star looks and stage presence, Busch became an identification model for his audience, a proletarian pop star with a narrative, an attitude, and style. He starred in *Kuhle Wampe* (1932), a film which clearly illustrated the milieu of the mass workers’ gathering for which the *Kampflied* was conceived. The text of the theme song, “Solidaritätslied”, draws attention to the importance of class unity, while the rulers are sowing seeds of division:

Unsre Herrn, wer sie auch seien

Sehen unsre Zwietracht gern

Denn solange sie uns entzweien

Bleiben sie doch unsre Herrn.

[...]

Proletarier aller Länder

Einigt euch und ihr seid frei.

Eure großen Regimente
Brechen jede Tyrannei!¹²

With their militancy, the lyrics of the Weimar *Kampflieder* prefigure the approach adopted by Ton Steine Scherben in the 1970s. Kurt Tucholsky's *Lied der Wohltätigkeit*, for example, incessantly agitates, warning of the deceptions of the ruling class and calling for working class solidarity:

Proleten fällt nicht auf den Schwindel, rein!
Sie schulden euch mehr als sie geben.
Sie schulden euch alles, die Länderei'n,
die Bergwerke und die Wollfärberei'n...
sie schulden euch Glück und Leben!
Nimm, was du kriegst! Aber pfeif auf den Quark.
Denk an deine Klasse und die mach stark!¹³

The use of music in conjunction with the lyrics also supported the educating and instructional function of the *Kampflied* singer. Eisler conceived a theory of the political song that combined current modernist aesthetics with a revolutionary ideological stance. Working with the Berlin group Das rote Sprachrohr, Eisler learned to use music to represent political concerns. He found that “music, if intelligently used, was in a position effectively to indicate the relationship between the various topics and to intimate the emotional level”.¹⁴ For example, his composition for *Lied der Wohltätigkeit* is a montage of chanson, marching rhythms, and jazz counterpoints. The light-hearted, almost decadent, cabaret aspect of these verses and chorus underline the parody of the lyrics – exposing the sham of the capitalists' good intentions towards the workers. A dialectic

tension, however, is continually created by the accompanying march pulse and the jazz inflections, whereby changes in tempo are also used to highlight certain ideas and insights.

While the advent of the Third Reich prevented Brecht and Eisler from testing out the effectiveness of their *Kampflied* in Germany, their proletarian musical aesthetic had a far-reaching influence and found particular resonance decades later in the music scene which emerged around the student protests of 1968. The next section will show how the unity of militant lyric and role play, and the use of music as a means of conveying the social tension of the themes, were aspects of Weimar agitprop culture which directly influenced *Ton Steine Scherben*.

The narrative role-play of Rio Reiser in the group *Ton Steine Scherben* can be described as proletarian in a wider sense, the group existing on an interface where anarchism meets the world of workers' apprenticeships. The story of *Ton Steine Scherben* is set within the post 1968 countercultural scene of Kreuzberg in West Berlin.¹⁵ Since 1961 sandwiched between the Berlin Wall and middle class Charlottenburg, this frontier district with its high Turkish immigrant population and cheap, run-down tenements had become a haven for those seeking an alternative existence: junkies, artists, militant students, men escaping military service. It correspondingly became a focal point for underground culture. In the aftermath of the student movement and the dissolving of the APO-linked *Kommune 1*, this scene of communes and squats had become more autonomous and militant. Emerging political groups such as the Blues, radical bohemian anarchists who had links to the terrorist groups RAF and *Bewegung 2. Juni*, existed alongside a number of the new *K-Gruppen*. As elsewhere in West Germany at that time, the latter saw their task as mobilising the political consciousness of the working class youth in their local environments.¹⁶ This mirrored the approach of *Ton Steine Scherben*,

who evolved in late 1969 and early 1970 out of the radical street theatre Hoffman's Comic Teater and the apprentices' agitprop group Rote Steine.

The group name literally means "Clay Stones Shards". According to Seidel, Rio Reiser had come across this exact word combination while reading Heinrich Schliemann's account of excavating the ruins of Troy. In this respect the words had connotations with destruction as well as with piecing together and rebuilding.¹⁷ As Sichtermann, Johler and Stahl remember, the name was also aptly reminiscent of the trade union Bau Steine Erden or the *volkseigene Betriebe* (VEB) of the GDR.¹⁸ At the same time there was an ambiguity in the words whereby musical associations to sound ("Ton") and the Rolling Stones ("Steine") could be exploited. The original members were Ralph Möbius aka Rio Reiser (vocals, guitar), R. P. S. Lanrue (guitar), Kai Sichtermann (bass guitar) and Wolfgang Seidel (drums). Forerunners of the Punk ethos seven years later, they pioneered an independent system of record production and distribution under their own David Volksmund label.¹⁹ By the end of the 1970s, the group had shifted 300,000 albums despite no advertising and being shunned by the radio stations.²⁰ In particular their first three albums, *Warum geht es mir so dreckig?*²¹, *Keine Macht für Niemand*²² and *Wenn die Nacht am tiefsten...*²³, function as an historical document of the Kreuzberg anarchist underground scene in the volatile period of the early 1970s.

What is distinct about Ton Steine Scherben's work is the clear unifying narrative of the songs: on their seminal album *Keine Macht für Niemand* lead singer Rio Reiser is the squatter anarchist. Each song tells a different story of life in their community: street battles with police; occupying houses; dodging fares on the Berlin Transport System; the communal squat as a haven from the boredom of apprenticeships; the quest for freedom from the constraints of the post-war Economic Miracle; the longing for utopian alternatives to capitalist reality. The narrative is enhanced by the real-life dialect and

mannerisms of Reiser in his vocal delivery, reflecting an attitude which verges on delinquency.²⁴ Here we see an element of ambiguity in the role-play of Reiser stemming from the masked figures of Hoffmann's Comic Teater: on one hand he is a performer enacting various roles ranging from violent anarchist and teenage delinquent, to political philosopher or sensitive lover. At the same time he is playing his authentic self: the stories, such as the occupation of the Georg-Rauch-Haus in 1971, are based on radical actions in which the group directly participated. The listener is caught up in this musical enactment of the hopes, aspirations and conflicts of the young Kreuzberg anarchists, apprentices and workers.

The musical soundtrack aids this portrayal: the Woodstock-style blues rock reminiscent of Joe Cocker or Jimi Hendrix, a style which at that time was laden with the symbolism of rebellion, is uniquely combined with the countercultural tradition of Berlin agitprop. This approach can be heard in the chanting and political sloganeering, which lends an air of proto-punk to the proceedings, and in the stage backdrops with political slogans.²⁵ This proletarian theatrical influence, which would be highly unusual in a British or American rock context, stems from a post-Russian Revolution European tradition. In the radical milieu of late 1960s West Berlin it was a feature of the alternative scene, where art was perceived as a tool or weapon²⁶ in the class struggle and the active participation of the audience (in a Brechtian breaking down of "the fourth wall") was a precondition. Ton Steine Scherben consciously referenced this political artistic heritage in their rock version of Brecht and Eisler's *Einheitsfrontlied* at the end of their first single *Mach Kaputt, was Euch Kaputt Macht* in 1971. A further element reminiscent of Brecht's Epic Theatre was the inclusion in their performances of spoken political texts and parables between songs, for example, when Kai Sichtermann read out *Yü Gung versetzt Berge* on stage in 1971.²⁷

This proletarian agitprop heritage should simultaneously in no way diminish Ton Steine Scherben's credentials as an authentic blues-rock band and Reiser as one of the great German rock vocalists. There is also an air of experimentalism: distorted guitars – a hallmark of early 1970s progressive rock – are used to augment the soundscape of chaos. Sound effects such as sirens and gunshots (as in *Menschenjäger*) denote street battles between urban guerrillas and police. A dystopian darkness emanates from the sound, not atypical of West Berlin rock groups of the 1970s and 1980s²⁸. This is juxtaposed, however, with the utopianism of lyrics such as *Schritt für Schritt ins Paradis* or the joyful exuberance and Berlin humour of the life-affirming *Mensch Meier* or *Rauch Haus Lied*. It was the latter aspect of fun which, as we will see, was to be rejected by the ideologues in the anarchist scene who wanted to use the group for their own political gains.

Ton Steine Scherben are acknowledged to be one of the first rock bands to sing in German. Their motivation to sing in German overlapped with that of the *Liedermacher* in their need to be understood by an audience.²⁹ Here there was a strong didactic element again stemming from the agitprop culture of the Weimar Republic. Indeed, as stated, one of the tenets of the proletarian song theory of Hanns Eisler was that lyrics and message had to be clear. The element of political instruction is evident in the songs, which often share acquired knowledge about class exploitation with their targeted audience. In *Die letzte Schlacht gewinnen wir* – again proto punk in style with its staccato yet melodic guitar riff – Reiser shouts: “Wir brauchen keinen starken Mann, denn wir sind selber stark genug./ Wir wissen selber, was zu tun ist, unser Kopf ist groß genug”.³⁰ A good example of an agitprop text set to popular music, the song is practically an anarchist manifesto with its list of demands: “Wir brauchen keine Hausbesitzer, / denn die Häuser gehören uns./ Wir brauchen keine Fabrikbesitzer, / die Fabriken gehören uns. / Aus dem Weg, Kapitalisten, / [...] / Schmeißt die Knarre weg, Polizisten [...]”.³¹ In *Schritt für Schritt ins*

Paradis the image of waking (a traditional symbol in revolutionary song for enlightenment³²) is juxtaposed with sleeping; knowledge with fear: “Ich hab lang gewartet und nachgedacht / Hatte viele Träume und jetzt bin ich wach / Wenn wir suchen, finden wir das neue Land / Uns trennt nichts vom Paradies außer unserer Angst.”³³ Interestingly the opening verse of this song echoes Franz Josef Degenhardt’s *Für wen ich singe* from 1968. But unlike the latter’s exclusivity, mostly listing the social groupings he is *not* singing for, Ton Steine Scherben’s call in *Schritt für Schritt ins Paradies* is inclusive, reaching out to all who may yet need to be convinced of the cause: “Du hörst mich singen, aber du kennst mich nicht / Du weißt nicht, für wen ich singe, aber ich sing für dich / Wer wird die neue Welt bauen, wenn nicht du und ich? / Und wenn du mich jetzt verstehen willst, dann verstehst du mich”.³⁴

The illustration of unequal power relationships in society, encouraging the need for “self-liberation through action”³⁵ is another striking characteristic of Ton Steine Scherben. Here the texts demonstrate in song similar conflicts to which Hoffmann’s Comic Teatre and Rote Steine acted out in their agitprop scenes.³⁶ In the songs the demand for freedom is frequently juxtaposed with the social restrictions which prevent this. Freedom is embodied by the political struggle on the streets, the communal life of the squats and the wilful violation of rules and regulations. The latter are represented by the work-place, the family home, institutions and figures of authority such as politicians, factory bosses and parents. *Wir müssen hier raus* describes the prison-like existence of daily work and the stifling life at home with parents. The father, who drinks in the pub to forget, represents the cynical viewpoint that the world will not change, while the youth maintains his generation can break out of these shackles. Like the dialogue of Degenhardt’s *Vatis Argumente* from 1968, the song expresses the generational conflict between father and son. But this is no intellectual satire, rather an anguished cry of

desperation mixed with utopian anticipation: “Wir müssen hier raus! / Das ist die Hölle! / Wir leben im Zuchthaus! / Wir sind geboren, um frei zu sein, / wir sind sechzig Millionen, / wir sind nicht allein./ Und wir werden es schaffen, /wir werden es schaffen”.³⁷

With its lyrical concentration on a unifying theme and theatrical elements, *Keine Macht für Niemand* bears resemblances at times to the concept album, popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s, like The Who’s *Tommy* or *Quadrophenia*. There are even parallels with the elements of fantasy which creep into the stories, which appear at times to be the wishful thinking of a would-be urban terrorist. It is here where the Scherben aesthetic clearly deviates from the model upright proletarian stance of the Weimar agitprop groups and the *Kampflieder* of Brecht and Eisler. The song *Feierabend* celebrates the laying down of tools at the end of the day as a possibility to let off steam. But in an ironic twist, playing on the ambiguity of the word “Lohn”, which means “just deserts” as well as “wage”, the narrator relates how the boss will also receive his pay-back when he goes to his home and drives off in his Mercedes.³⁸ A humorous element of fantasy can also be seen in *Paul Panzers Blues*, which addresses the theme of freedom linked to communal ownership. The everyday situation of a young alienated worker flips over into an orgy of destructive behaviour. Rejected by his girlfriend after he has stolen food for her, a young delinquent goes on a drinking binge which ends at a fairground shooting stall at the weekend where he dreams of killing capitalists. On the Monday morning he tanks up with alcohol, marches with a club into his workplace where he smashes in his boss’s teeth shouting: “Du Drecksau, gehst jetzt arbeiten für meinen Lohn! / Ab marsch in die Kolonne, [...] / Der Laden gehört jetzt uns allen, nicht mehr dir allein. / Dein Wichserjob ist aus, wir mästen dich nicht mehr, du fettes Schwein”.³⁹

The song *Mensch Meier* depicts another real life situation, this time about dodging tram fares, but again embellished with theatrical fantasy. On his way to work the character Meier refuses to buy a ticket, saying he is saving up to keep pace with tax increases. The Berlin Transport Authority (BVG) should rather claw its debts back from the “Bonzen, die uns beklaue[n]”.⁴⁰ When the conductor threatens to call the police, the workers on the bus show solidarity with Meier, threatening to throw the conductor off instead. The group chant the chorus in Berlin dialect in the style of a football crowd: “Nee, nee, nee, eher brennt die BVG! / Ich bin hier oben noch ganz dicht, / der Spaß ist zu teuer, von mir kriegste nüscht! / Nee, nee, nee, eher brennt die BVG! / Ich bin hier oben noch ganz dicht, / der Spaß ist zu teuer, von mir kriegste nüscht!”⁴¹

The *Rauch Haus Lied*, one of the group’s most famous tracks, relates to an historical event in which Ton Steine Scherben were among the main protagonists. On 8 December 1971 the group had performed a Teach-In in the Old Mensa of the Technical University in West Berlin in memory of Georg von Rauch, a member of Bewegung 2. Juni, who was killed by police in a shoot-out four days earlier. After the concert the group, together with members of the audience, went to Mariannenplatz in the Berlin district of Kreuzberg and occupied the former nurse’s home of the Bethanien hospital and re-named it the Georg-von-Rauch-Haus.⁴² Strategically placed towards the end of the album, the song consolidates the sense of youthful fun at putting one over on authority. The reappearance of the character Meier, furthermore, adds to the conceptual unity of the album. The song re-creates the euphoria of the squatters, who ultimately win their stand-off with the police. It is set to a bright, life-affirming, sing-along pop-rock melody featuring a recurring riff played by piano and bass. The festive atmosphere of the piece prevails despite the references to tear gas and truncheons – it is a celebration of the everyday life of the Kreuzberg anarchist: “Der Mariannenplatz war blau, / soviel Bullen

waren da, / und Mensch Meier mußte heulen, / das war wohl das Tränengas. / Und er fragt irgendeinen: / ‘Sag mal, ist hier heut 'n Fest?’ / ‘Sowas ähnliches’, sacht einer / ‘das Bethanien wird besetzt’”.⁴³ In the chorus the squatters respond to the police attempts to clear the square, chanting: “Doch die Leute im besetzen Haus/ riefen: ‚Ihr kriegt uns hier nicht raus! / Das ist unser Haus, / schmeißt doch endlich Schmidt und Press und Mosch⁴⁴ aus Kreuzberg raus’”.⁴⁵

It is arguably this sense of fun in Ton Steine Scherben’s songs which led to conflicts with the anarchist political leaders in their local West Berlin milieu. It is well documented how the group felt increasingly alienated from the seriousness – the theory, dogmas and calculation⁴⁶ – of the left-wing militants who wanted to use the group for their own purposes. This interference even went as far as censorship: according to Reiser the *Rauch Haus Lied* was rejected by the political committee which ran the squat as having “nichts mit der Realität zu tun”. It even forbade the group to play the song at the Teach-In at the Audimax of the TU in March 1972, for which occasion the song was originally written. The group had also encountered scepticism with their song *Keine Macht für Niemand*. It had been commissioned by Reiser’s friend Anne Reiche, a member of the militant anarchist group Blues. The RAF, however, dismissed the song, which originally had the working title *Hymne für den bewaffneten Kampf* as “Blödsinn, irrelevant und für den antiimperialistischen Kampf unbrauchbar”.⁴⁷ Another example of diverging goals was the Teach-In at the TU in April 1974 when the group performed in front of colourful backdrops of trees and flowers and sprinkled glitter over the audience. The anarchist leaders were allegedly horrified, unable to see how such an accessory of the currently fashionable Glam Rock could have a role in the class struggle.⁴⁸

One can postulate that in the narrative role-play of a song and the theatrical element of a show – where performance is not reality, but in Brechtian terms can be used

to demonstrate aspects of reality – there was already great potential for misunderstandings with ideologues, who only sought an unambiguous message. The freedom which Ton Steine Scherben desired for their artistic and professional development was ultimately inhibited. The group gradually became weary of their position as “Hochkapelle” of the leftist scene⁴⁹, having their lyrics and performances constantly scrutinised and being expected to play political benefit concerts for no or little money whenever asked.⁵⁰ Such pressures were to contribute towards the group’s decision in 1975 to leave Berlin for the countryside in Fresenhagen in North Germany thus ending the first and historically most significant phase in the life of the group.

Ton Steine Scherben finally broke up in 1985, after which Rio Reiser embarked on a solo career achieving his most notable success in 1986 with the single *König von Deutschland*. Since Reiser’s premature death in 1996 the political and musical legacy of Ton Steine Scherben has been enthusiastically promoted in books, films and tribute concerts, a testament to the degree of nostalgia felt towards a by-gone era when musical protest played an active role in street and urban politics.

This final section will look at the narrative role-play of Gerhard Gundermann in the GDR, one of the most influential political singers in the post-Biermann era and the early years of unification. In the GDR, where the image of the worker was sacred, the narrative portrayal of the proletarian in song (or in any literary or theatrical form) was a delicate business. Since the formation of the GDR in 1949, the workers’ songs had been vigorously promoted as part of its revolutionary heritage. As well as appearing on the records of Ernst Busch they were published in songbooks such as *Leben Singen Kämpfen. Liederbuch der FDJ*.⁵¹ These had an educational function and were sung in the FDJ, in schools and in the army. In the emerging singing club culture of the early 1960s repertoires expanded to include international songs of freedom, as promoted in East

Berlin by the resident Canadian banjo-player Perry Friedman.⁵² In 1967 the FDJ hijacked the autonomous Berlin Hootenanny-Klub and forced it to change its name to the Oktoberklub, in memory of the Russian Revolution. In the songs of the *Singebewegung* a distinctive narrative emerged. The only type of self-written song allowed was what was termed “DDR-konkret”: songs reflecting the everyday concerns and problems of young people and workers. The narrative should reflect loyalty to the ideologies and principles of the state, and as in socialist realist literature, an exemplary role-play was demanded.⁵³ An example of this is Oktoberklub member Reinhold Andert’s *Lied vom Klassenkampf* (1968) in which a young activist demonstrates his ideological conviction to a young colleague whom he attempts to convert to the socialist cause: “Ich werde das Buch heut zu Ende lesen / Damit ich’s dir morgen geben kann / Wir können es auch gemeinsam lesen / Weil man es dann besser verstehen kann”.⁵⁴ The Kurt Demmler text *Lied vom Vaterland* (1969) – in prescribed fashion – expresses the “we” narrative role-play of the collective youth of the GDR in its praise of the emancipatory achievements of both youth and state: “Und was haben wir selber an unserm Vaterland? / Wir haben, daß wir Herren sind und Herrn aus eigener Hand / Und Herrn über uns selber und über die Natur, / [...] / Wir haben endlich ein Gesicht / und endlich auch die Zuversicht – dies Land ist von Bestand”.⁵⁵ The *Liederbücher* of the youth radio show DT64 between 1969 and 1974 ensured that these songs (including, of course, Hartmut König’s *Singeklub* anthem *Sag mir, wo du stehst*) had the widest possible circulation. But the wishful thinking in such songs as *Lied vom Vaterland* was not going to convince youths in the long term and by 1973 at the latest the popularity of the *Singebewegung* began to decline drastically. The proletarian *Kampflied* had had its day.

In the 1960s and 1970s there also existed an alternative culture of critical *Liedermacher*. These included Wolf Biermann and Bettina Wegner, both of whom were

subject to censorship and performance bans. And from the mid-1970s onwards the *Singebewegung* itself began producing singers and groups who endeavoured to expose the gap between ideal and reality. In a renewed climate of censorship against the background of the Biermann Affair of 1976 some began experimenting with theatrical techniques in an effort to express taboo concepts. Former stalwarts of the singing movement such as Bernd Rump from the Songgruppe TU Dresden and Gerhard Gundermann from the Singeklub Hoyerswerda formed the *Liedertheater* groups Schicht and Brigade Feuerstein respectively. The Berlin group Karls Enkel, led by Hans-Eckardt Wenzel and Steffen Mensching, also embarked upon a *Liedertheater* project with the intention to escape from what Wenzel described as the “Ghetto der Singebewegung”.⁵⁶ This new form pioneered a multi-media approach using text, drama, costumes, masks and music. A high point of this movement was the *Hammer-Rehwü* of 1982, a coproduction of Karls Enkel, the folk group Wacholder, and the duo Beckert & Schulz. In this production, key concepts of Erwin Piscator’s famous proletarian review of 1924, the *Roter Rummel*⁵⁷, were turned on their head in order to surreptitiously parody the actual socialism of the 1980s. Whereas the *Roter Rummel* propagated a distinct political moral and was used to support the Communist Party before the elections of 1924, the *Hammer-Rehwü* was consciously anti-ideological. If the hero of Piscator’s revue was the proletarian worker, the hero of the *Hammer-Rehwü* was the clown, who parodied a glorified image of the worker. This was not lost on the audience who on the live video recording can be heard to roar their appreciation.⁵⁸ In the *Hammer-Rehwü* other typical figures of the proletarian revue such as the policeman, the capitalist, and the pastor were replaced with social “types” of the GDR such as the general, the dictator, and the fellow-traveller, all of whom were parodied in a controversial way.⁵⁹

Gundermann, too, sang in a clown's mask to rock music accompaniment in Brigade Feuerstein's marketplace spectacles in 1980.⁶⁰ In his solo performances, however, his role-play was non-ironic, portraying the self-educated worker, street-wise and critically minded, yet committed to socialism. While proletarian in narrative, it did not have the militancy of Ernst Busch or Ton Steine Scherben. His critical stance, however, resulted in the early 1980s in expulsion from the SED and subsequently from the Stasi, where he had previously been an informer. Songs such as *Vater du bist müde* (1988), written by fellow Brigade Feuerstein member Alfons Förster, express their generation's loss of faith in the aging GDR leadership.⁶¹ *Hoy Woy* (1986) is Gundermann's tribute to his industrial home town of Hoyerswerda: "hoy woy, / dir sind wir treu, / du blasse blume auf sand. / heiß, laut, / staubig und verbaut, / du schönste stadt hier im land". The final verse, however, conveys the insistence that even loyal workers are not going to be duped by the political propaganda slogans on the walls:

deine grauen häuser werden nicht bunt
 wir reiben uns an dir nur die pinsel wund
 deshalb gucken wir nicht mehr auf die wände,
 sondern leuten auf gesichter und hände,
 deshalb, daß wir augen haben,
 die sich nicht ablenken lassen von fassaden,
 deshalb können wir nie voll andacht stehn,
 nein, wir müssen immer dahinter sein,
 wie in
 hoy woy [...] ⁶²

In *Lancelots Zwischenbilanz* (1986) Gundermann refers to the exclusion from political participation of anyone who, like himself, diverged from the official line. Although he still calls himself a communist, his utopian dreams have not been realized and his red carnation has withered: “mein halbes leben steh ich an der weltzeituhr. / und ich bin nicht mehr so jung. / und ich warte und ich warte./ und die rote nelke trag ich immer noch am helm. / obwohl sie mir in einem kalten winter verdorrte”. The second stanza reflects his disappointment at the lack of genuine news in the state-controlled newspapers. The chorus repeats the mantra of the age – also reflected in the songs of *Liedermacher* and rock bands from Wenzel to Silly, Pankow and City – of the refusal to “wait” any longer: to be an active participant in shaping one’s own destiny and that of one’s state: “und ich weiß nicht, ob ich noch starten kann, / bis in die Welt. / und ich weiß nicht, ob ich noch warten kann, / bis die Welt mich zählt”.⁶³

In the *Wende* period Gundermann took part in the protests against the GDR government, reading out the resolution of the rock musicians and *Liedermacher* before concerts in solidarity with the new civil rights organisation Neues Forum.⁶⁴ But as it turned out, the Politbüro and Stasi’s loss of power in autumn 1989 meant that *Liedermacher* quickly had to look around for new themes to write about. Suddenly stripped of their function as substitutes for newspapers, many of the singer/songwriters were to endure difficult times ahead. Gundermann, however, was an exception to this rule. In the early 1990s he emerged as the musical and poetic mouthpiece for left-leaning East Germans who had lost their position in society or were simply grappling with the pain of the final shattering of their socialist ideal. Assisted in the studio by musicians from the celebrated rock band Silly, Gundermann’s popularity in the East even soared (in inverse relationship to the fate of most others) up until his premature death in 1998.⁶⁵ Named the “Springsteen des Ostens” (due to the sound of his live backing band

Seilschaft), he released a series of acclaimed albums throughout the 1990s which hit the nerve of the times in the east. This was acknowledged by *Der Spiegel*: “Kaum ein anderer Künstler hat die Enttäuschung vieler Ostdeutschen nach der Vereinigung in so prägnante Verse gefaßt wie er“.⁶⁶ In personifying this emotional and intellectual stance so unambiguously in his songs, Gundermann’s narrative role-play can be seen to be that of the culturally and politically disenfranchised East German. The lines “mein herzblatt was bist du so traurig / nur weil dieser tag / wieder nicht gehalten hat / was er versprach” from the song *herzblatt* on the 1993 album *Der 7te Sumarai*⁶⁷ sum up the singer’s upbeat resilience in the face of disappointment. On the other hand, the painful experience of the empty promises of socialism is constantly at hand, as evident in *pferd aus holz*, a parable of the dashed expectations of past and present. In the song he relates the story of the boy who wanted a real horse for Christmas only to receive a wooden one: “mama hör her / ich wünsche mir sehr / so ein pferdchen / mama was solls / das hier ist nur ein pferd aus holz”. In the conclusion the lyrical “ich” appears haunted by his unfulfilled dreams:

für drei jahre und noch heute im traum
 ist es mir treu hinterhergerollt
 ich habs nie geliebt als es zu mir kam
 seit es fort ist kenn ich keine märchen mehr
 ich krieg jedes jahr hundert grosse pakete
 aber sie sind alle leer⁶⁸

Gundermann conveys the negative experience of capitalism in the song *ruhetag* from the same album, in which he sings: “sag dem bettler vor der tür / mein herz hat grade heut ruhetag”.⁶⁹ And in the song *kann dich nicht mehr leiden* he sums up the antipathy felt toward supposed western benefactors: “du hast mich auf dein traumschiff

mitgezottelt / doch ich kann dich nicht mehr leiden / du drückst mich an dein herz aus
stein / und ich sollte dankbar sein".⁷⁰

In 1994 Gundermann controversially admitted to having been a Stasi informer. Expelled from the Army Officer's School and later from the Party itself, he had been ultimately relieved of his Stasi duties in 1984, after which point he became the object of Stasi observation himself.⁷¹ Gundermann hints at the complexities surrounding the theme of informers and reflects East German skepticism at the media's handling of revelations from Stasi files in the 1993 song *sieglinde*. In this the singer ironically bemoans the loss of a friend who he discovers had been informing on him:

sie sagen du hast mich belauscht
doch ausser dir hat mir nie einer zugehört
und schneller als das wasser rauscht
hab ich dir meine geheimnisse diktiert

sie sagen du hast mich beschattet
für deinen schatten danke ich
bei zuviel sonne auf die platte
krieg ich doch nurn sonnenstich

sie sagen du hast mich verraten
doch fehlt mir ja bis heute kein bein
der teufel wollte braten
und die pfanne sollte deine sein

[...] ⁷²

Despite beginning a new apprenticeship as a carpenter after being made redundant in 1995, he continued to perform tirelessly with Seilschaft, releasing a further CD *Frühstück für immer*⁷³ followed by *Engel über dem Revier*⁷⁴ in 1997. Songs such as *leine los* ominously hint at Gundermann's depression: "alle filme die ich drehen wollte sind schon gedreht /[...]/ alle lieder, die ich machen wollte singt schon der boss / ich bin nurn armer hund aber wer / wer liess mich von der leine los".⁷⁵ Having lost his culture, his country, and now his job, Gundermann expresses in the title track *engel über dem revier* that his guardian angel is no longer watching over him: "er war mein seil über den schwarzen fluss der fluss war so breit ich fuhr mehr als zwanzig jahr / jetzt da ich frei an das andere ufer springen muss merke ich wie gut sein feuerschutz war".⁷⁶ Gundermann's death from heart failure in 1998 at the age of forty-three was greeted with shock throughout the whole *Liedermacher* fraternity in East Germany.

This article has examined three different cases of proletarian narratives in German political song of the twentieth century. What Busch, Reiser and Gundermann have in common as singers is a clearly identifiable persona expressing the proletarian views and attitude of their respective times and political cultures. Each uses the popular music of their day in which to couch their narrative role-play and thereby speak to their own audience: the agitating *Kampflied* of Busch, the distorted guitar-based blues rock of Ton Steine Scherben, and the hybrid combination of German political song and Springsteen-influenced pop-rock in the case of Gundermann. On closer inspection, however, there are also clear differences: while all narratives reflect, to varying extents, the traditional educational function of the German political singer, the songs of Busch and Ton Steine Scherben – both written in unstable political times of high counter-cultural dissent – share an agitating militancy which is

absent from Gundermann. As explained, the GDR public had become immune to this style – associated with the state propaganda of the *Singebewegung* – and would no longer have tolerated it. At the same time Gundermann was of the post-Biermann generation of *Liedermacher* (including Hans-Eckardt Wenzel, Gerhard Schöne, Barbara Thalheim and others) who had moved on to a more subtly questioning style reflected in both music and lyrics.

The biggest difference, however, is in the sub-cultural anarchist attitude – verging on delinquency – of Reiser, expressed in songs about apprenticeship blues and street battles with police. This provides an element of ironical mischief-making which is clearly absent from the *Kampflieder* of Busch or the proletarian introspections of Gundermann. Alongside his authentic critical voice, Reiser's narrative contains an element of entertainment, consistent with Frith's description of the ironical narrative of the pop singer, who in his role-play presents "character as style".

¹ See Karl Riha: *Moritat, Bänkelsong, Protestballade. Zur Geschichte des engagierten Liedes in Deutschland*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 1975, S. 77-96; see also David Robb: Narrative Role-Play as Communicative Strategy in German Protest Song. In: *Protest Song in East and West Germany*. Hg. von David Robb. Rochester/ NY: Camden House 2007, S. 67-96.

² Franz Josef Degenhardt: *Vatis argumente*. On: *Vatis Argumente/P.T. aus Arizona*. Polydor 53 026, 1969 (Single Deutschland).

³ Franz Josef Degenhardt: *Befragung eines Kriegsdienstverweigerers*. B-Side of *Sacco und Vanzetti*. Polydor 2041 252, 1972 (Single Deutschland).

⁴ Simon Frith: *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP 1998, S. 171.

⁵ Ebd., S. 32.

⁶ See Walter Benjamin: *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1966.

⁷ Frith (wie Anm. 2), S. 34.

⁸ Hanns Eisler: Die Arbeitermusikbewegung. In: *Musik und Politik: Textkritische Ausgabe*. Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag für Musik 1982, S. 180.

⁹ Frith (wie Anm. 2), S. 165.

¹⁰ Bertolt Brecht: *Einheitsfrontlied*. In: *Gedichte*. Leipzig: Reclam 1976, S. 111.

¹¹ Frith (wie Anm. 2), S. 166.

¹² Bertolt Brecht: *Solidaritätslied* (wie Anm. 10), S. 112.

- ¹³ Ernst Busch: *Das Lied der Wohltätigkeit*. On: *Merkt ihr nicht. Ernst Busch singt Tucholsky/Eisler*. Barbarossa 013502, 1997 (CD Deutschland).
- ¹⁴ Albert Betz: *Hanns Eisler. Political Musician*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1982, S. 65.
- ¹⁵ A version of this section on Ton Steine Scherben will appear in David Robb: The Protest Song of the late-1960s and early 1970s: Franz Josef Degenhardt and Ton Steine Scherben. In *A Companion to German Pop*. Hg. von Uwe Schutte. Berlin: De Gruyter 2016.
- ¹⁶ Timothy S. Brown: Music as a Weapon? Ton Steine Scherben and the Politics of Rock in Cold War Berlin. In: *German Studies Review* 32/1 (2009), S. 1-22, here S. 7.
- ¹⁷ Wolfgang Seidel: Scherben... In: *Scherben. Musik, Politik und Wirkung*. Hg. von Wolfgang Seidel. Mainz: Ventil Verlag 2005, S. 69-114, here S. 77.
- ¹⁸ Siehe Kai Sichtermann, Jens Johler and Christian Stahl: *Keine Macht für niemand. Die Geschichte der Ton Steine Scherben*. Berlin: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf 2003, S. 14.
- ¹⁹ Siehe Sichtermann et al: *Keine Macht* (wie Anm. 9), S. 75-77. "David" was a reference to the underdog David who challenged the giant Goliath.
- ²⁰ Brown: Music as a Weapon? (wie Anm. 7), S. 10. See also Albert Koch: *Angriff auf Schlaraffenland – 20 Jahre deutschsprachige Popmusik* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein Verlag 1987), S. 53.
- ²¹ Ton Steine Scherben: *Warum geht es mir so dreckig?* David Volksmund TSS13/L2, 1971 (LP Deutschland).
- ²² Ton Steine Scherben: *Keine Macht für Niemand*. David Volksmund TSS 17/L1, 1972 (LP Deutschland).
- ²³ Ton Steine Scherben: *Wenn die Nacht am tiefsten...* David Volksmund TSS3 L49, 1975 (LP Deutschland).
- ²⁴ Reiser denies in an early TV interview with Albrecht Metzger (*Jour Fixe*, SDR, August 1971) that their slogans were „primitive and banal“ claiming that is misleading because they had the precise function of enlightening and agitating their audience of apprentices (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpE_jpcIHTc).
- ²⁵ For example, Georg Büchner's "Peace to the shacks, war on the palaces" from the 1848 Revolution. Sichtermann et al: *Keine Macht für niemand* (wie Anm. 9), S. 64
- ²⁶ Siehe Musik ist eine Waffe (Manifesto). In: *Agit 883*, December 24, 1970. Quoted in Brown: Music as a Weapon (wie Anm. 7), S. 16.
- ²⁷ Sichtermann et al: *Keine Macht* (wie Anm.9), S. 64-65.
- ²⁸ This comes over in the live songs of Ton Steine Scherben's TV documentary of 1971. Wolfgang Seidel also writes about the "darkness" of the Scherben's guitar riff on *Macht kaputt was euch kaputt macht* from their first album. Seidel: Berlin und die Linke (wie Anm. 8), S. 26.
- ²⁹ Ebd, S. 28.
- ³⁰ Ton Steine Scherben: *Die letzte schlacht gewinnen wir*. On: *Keine Macht für Niemand* (wie Anm. 22).
- ³¹ Ebd.
- ³² See for example: Ferdinand Freiligrath: *Reveille*, or Walter Mossmann: *Wach auf mein Kind* (parody of *Badisches Wiegenlied*). See David Robb and Eckhard John: *Lieder der 1848er Revolution*. In *Historisch-kritisches Liederlexikon*. Hg. von Eckhard John. Freiburg: Zentrum für populäre Kultur und Musik, 2008-2013. http://www.liederlexikon.de/ueber_liederlexikon_de/projekte/ahrc-dfg_projekt
- ³³ Scherben: *Schritt für Schritt ins Paradis* (wie Anm. 22).
- ³⁴ Ebd.
- ³⁵ See Brown: Music as a Weapon (wie Anm. 7), S. 1.
- ³⁶ Indeed the song *Mach Kaputt, was Euch Kaputt Macht* was originally from Hoffmann's Comic Teater *Singspiel Rita and Paul* from 1969.
- ³⁷ Scherben: *Wir müssen hier raus!* (wie Anm. 22).
- ³⁸ Scherben: *Feierabend* (wie Anm. 22).
- ³⁹ Scherben: *Paul Panzers Blues* (wie Anm. 22).
- ⁴⁰ Scherben: *Mensch Meier* (wie Anm. 22).
- ⁴¹ Ebd.
- ⁴² Siehe Sichtermann et al: *Keine Macht* (wie Anm. 9), S. 90-94. Siehe auch Rio Reiser: *König von Deutschland. Erinnerungen an Ton Steine Scherben und mehr*. Berlin: Möbius Rekords 2001, S. 239.
- ⁴³ Scherben: *Rauch Haus Song*.
- ⁴⁴ The named persons here were builders and speculators associated with the planned new centre of Kreuzberg. See notes for *Rauch-Haus-Song* on *Riolyrics* (www.riolyrics.de). This was part of an urban renewal project in West Berlin geared towards the demolition of old buildings, which was vigorously contested by the alternative youth in Kreuzberg. See also Brown: Music as a Weapon (wie Anm. 7), S. 10.
- ⁴⁵ *Rauch Haus Song*.

- ⁴⁶ A much cited example is the occupation of the factory grounds on the Mariannen Platz on 3 July 1971 after a concert in the refectory of the Technical University at which the Rote Steine were present. After the peaceful occupation the political activist Lothar Binger allegedly called the police to intervene in order to provoke media interest. See Sichtermann et al: *Keine Macht* (wie Anm. 9), S. 66-69.
- ⁴⁷ Ebd, S. 112-113.
- ⁴⁸ Ebd, S. 161-163.
- ⁴⁹ Sichtermann et al, *Keine Macht* (wie Anm. 9), S. 162.
- ⁵⁰ Sichtermann et al refer to the group as “die freiwillige Feuerwehr im linken Veranstaltungsbetrieb”, *Keine Macht* (wie Anm. 9), S. 149.
- ⁵¹ *Leben Singen Kämpfen. Liederbuch der Freien Deutschen Jugend* (Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben, 1949).
- ⁵² Lutz Kirchenwitz: *Folk, Chanson und Liedermacher in der DDR* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1993), S. 31-35; Holger Böning: *Der Traum von einer Sache* (Bremen: Edition Lumiere, 2004), S. 201.
- ⁵³ The first paragraph of the Jugendgesetz of 1974 indicates the role culture in general was expected to play: “Vorrangige Aufgabe bei der Gestaltung der entwickelten sozialistischen Gesellschaft ist es, alle jungen Menschen zu Staatsbürgern zu erziehen, die den Ideen des Sozialismus treu ergeben sind, als Patrioten und Internationalisten denken und handeln, den Sozialismus stärken und gegen alle Feinde zuverlässig schützen. Die Jugend trägt selbst hohe Verantwortung für ihre Entwicklung zu sozialistischen Persönlichkeiten”. Jugendgesetz der DDR vom 28. Januar 1974, Point 1.1. <http://www.verfassungen.de/de/ddr/jugendgesetz74.htm>
- ⁵⁴ Oktoberklub: *Das Lied vom Klassenkampf*, on *Unterm Arm die Gitarre*. Amiga 850153, 1968 (LP Deutschland).
- ⁵⁵ Kurt Demmler: *Lied vom Vaterland*, in *DT64 Liederbuch*. Leipzig: Hofmeister Musikverlag 1969, S. 48.
- ⁵⁶ Hans-Eckardt Wenzel: *Sag mir wo du stehst*, Rockradio B (20 October 1992).
- ⁵⁷ See Christa Hasche: “Bürgerliche Revue und ‘Roter Rummel,’ Studien zur Entwicklung massenwirksamen Theaters in den Formen der Revue in Berlin 1903–1925”, Ph.D. diss. Berlin: Humboldt University 1980, S. 90.
- ⁵⁸ Karls Enkel, Wacholder, and Beckert & Schulz: *Hammer Revue* (1982), video recording (Berlin: Lied-Zentrum der Akademie der Künste der DDR 1982).
- ⁵⁹ David Robb: *Zwei Clowns im Lande des verlorenen Lachens: Das Liedertheater Wenzel & Mensching* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag 1998), S. 58–9.
- ⁶⁰ *Gundermann*, documentary (DDR-Fernsehen 1983). This was drastically censored and was only shown once in the GDR.
- ⁶¹ Gerhard Gundermann: *An Vater. On: Männer, Frauen und Maschinen*. Amiga 74321192932, 1988 (CD Deutschland).
- ⁶² Ebd. See also Robb: Narrative Role-Play as Communicative Strategy, S. 91-93.
- ⁶³ Ebd.
- ⁶⁴ A video recording exists of Gundermann, Gina Pietsch and Wenzel and Mensching reading the resolution before a concert at the Roter Rummel in October 1989 (Berlin: Akademie der Künste der DDR, 1989).
- ⁶⁵ See also Robb: The Demise of Political Song and the New Discourse of Techno, in *Protest Song*, S. 257-259.
- ⁶⁶ “Sänger ohne Schützengel”. In: *Der Spiegel*, 2 July 1998, S. 179.
- ⁶⁷ Gerhard Gundermann: *Der 7te Sumarai*. Buschfunk 0032-2, 1993 (CD Deutschland).
- ⁶⁸ Gerhard Gundermann: *pferd aus holz* (wie Anm. 66).
- ⁶⁹ Gerhard Gundermann: *ruhetag* (wie Anm. 66).
- ⁷⁰ Gerhard Gundermann: *kann dich nicht mehr leiden* (wie Anm. 66).
- ⁷¹ “Gundermann, Kein Leben ohne Engel”. In: *Berliner Zeitung*, 23 June 1998, S. 9.
- ⁷² Gerhard Gundermann: *sieglinde* (wie Anm. 66).
- ⁷³ Gerhard Gundermann: *Frühstück für immer*. Buschfunk 00932, 1995 (CD Deutschland).
- ⁷⁴ Gerhard Gundermann: *Engel über dem Revier*. Buschfunk 00702, 1997 (CD Deutschland).
- ⁷⁵ Gerhard Gundermann: *leine los* (wie Anm.73).
- ⁷⁶ Gerhard Gundermann: *engel über dem revier* (wie Anm.73).