

A tribute to German Sinto musician Häns'che Weiss

Bernd Reinhardt
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Guitarist Häns'che Weiss died June 2 following a long illness. The German Sinto [a Romani people of Central Europe] musician was a significant interpreter of so-called “gypsy jazz,” the style of music developed and first brought to a worldwide audience in the 1930s by the great Django Reinhardt (1910-1953).

Weiss was born into a West Berlin Sinti family in 1951 and began playing the guitar at an early age. Prior to the Second World War, his father, Gono, had been a versatile musician who mastered the violin, guitar, accordion and zither. Häns'che assimilated older pop music, from operetta to swing, but like the rest of the young people of his day grew up with the music of the Shadows, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Motown and modern jazz.

The first television appearance of the Schnuckenack Reinhardt Quintet in 1967 led to a cultural awakening among German Sinti and Roma. Little by little, a whole series of records appeared under the aggressive motto: Music of German gypsies. This was also the beginning of the career of Häns'che Weiss, who would first appear as a member of the Schnuckenack Reinhardt Quintet, and later founded the Häns'che Weiss Quintet in 1972.

From the outset, the group strived to develop a contemporary music style. At the same time, music from different generations could be heard. While Schnuckenack Reinhardt dedicated himself to the older salon tradition of George Boulanger and Emmerich Kálmán, offering thrilling interpretations of swing music that evoked the Hungarian greats, his musical companion Bobby Falta followed in the footsteps of electric guitarists such as Barney Kessel and Wes Montgomery.

On the whole, the 1970s was a time of experimentation. In addition to violin and accordion, the group La Romanderie—founded in Dortmund in 1973—featured electric guitar and harp. Singer Kitty Winter released a jazz-rock and fusion album in 1978. A year later, a young woman (Dunja Blum) was met with great applause when she took the stage at the large “Musikfest der Zigeuner” in Darmstadt and presented a modern take on a song in the language of the German Sinti—“Dschane du ga.” Later television appearances revealed Blum to be a modern jazz interpreter with a penchant for the bossa nova.

For violinist Zipflo Reinhardt, more modern, international jazz musicians were influential, such as violinists Jean-Luc Ponty and Didier Lockwood. The 1979 album *The Gypsy Jazz Violin Summit*, featuring four Sinti violinists, was not only a world removed from the stereotype of gypsy violin music, it also represented an emancipation of gypsy swing.

In the climate created by the student revolt and the general radicalization of the late 1960s, the Sinti and Roma campaigned strongly for their civil rights, for their culture and for official recognition of the homicidal, racist persecution they suffered under the Nazis. As before, the members of many families who emerged traumatized from the concentration camps were still denied compensation.

Otto Rosenberg, father of the renowned singer Marianne Rosenberg, became involved in this movement in the Social Democratic Party (SPD). In a television documentary, Schnuckenack Reinhardt voiced his great esteem for SPD chairman Willy Brandt. *Lass Maro Tschatschepen* (“Let us demand our rights”) was the self-confident title of the fourth album of the Häns'che Weiss Quintet, winner of the 1978 German Record Prize.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the Sinto Tornado Rosenberg and the Roma Rudko Kawczynski combined to form “Duo Z” and sing acerbic “German Gypsy Songs” in the singer-songwriter tradition of the 1960s and 70s. They sang of the sobering, contemporary situation of Sinti and Roma in West Germany, who struggled with bureaucracy, prejudice, unemployment and the threat of deportation. The song revealed that despite official recognition in the field of music, there was little improvement in their broader social situation in the decade of Social Democratic rule in Germany.

With the emergence of the Greens, who made appeals to migrants and minorities, the hopes of German Sinti and Roma rose once more. Violinist Titi Winterstein, who played with Häns'che Weiss for several years, publicly supported the 1983 election campaign of the Greens and took part in the large human chain from Stuttgart to Ulm initiated by the peace movement against the deployment of US Pershing mid-range missiles.

Following albums that count among the classics of gypsy jazz and world music, including *Couleurs* (1981), with eight musicians including Indian percussionist Trilok Gurtu, the live album *Zugaben* (1985) by the Häns'che Weiss Ensemble marked a turning point. The tone is more intimate, much jazzier. With the new trio lineup, Häns'che's love for the lightness and more relaxed quality of bossa nova comes through for the first time. The absence of the traditional rhythm guitar accompaniment of gypsy swing led to freer, more lucent solos.

The ideal complement was found in the dynamic playing of violinist Martin Weiss. Häns'che's nephew, on board

since *Couleurs*, is an unbelievable virtuoso and swinger, who combines the elegance of Stéphane Grappelli with the aggressive bowing of Titi Winterstein. A new, strongly theatrical element was provided not least by the creaking bass and scat-singing contributions of the Swiss bassist Vali Mayer.

After the albums *Erinnerungen* (1988) and *Vis à vis* (1991), full of terrific music, Martin left to follow his own musical path. After an album with Zipflo Reinhardt, Vali and Häns'che carried on as a duo. Their concerts were distinguished by a high level of playfulness. The artistic maturity of the two musicians was especially evident in their thrilling and ambitious improvisations.

Häns'che Weiss was no musical revolutionary or groundbreaking innovator. What distinguished him, in addition to his impressive mastery of his instrument, was his rousing musicality. His harmonic sensibility and feeling for quieter tones in his later phase often lent his guitar playing a distinctly poetic character. At the same time, his live performances revealed a musician with a warm sense of humour.

Unlike other jazz colleagues who, unfortunately, had imbibed their Frankfurt School and postmodernist “lessons,” Häns'che had no problem with “beautiful tones” or what formalists would regard as old-fashioned, “corny” music. When the time was ripe, one or another *csárdás* [traditional Hungarian folk dance] was played at evening concerts—free from any whiff of irony. The musette waltzes [a style of popular French music and dance], composed by Häns'che, can be seen as tributes to the older generation of musicians of Sinti and Manouche [Roma people in France] background. One waltz is dedicated to his father Gono. Like Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grappelli, Häns'che regarded the fusion of different traditions with jazz as the ideal musical language, free from any cultural or national barriers.

Such an international and cosmopolitan outlook has often been held against Sinti artists as a betrayal of their cultural identity. They are not genuine “Gypsies,” the argument goes, because they listen to or even play modern pop music, instead of playing nothing but “authentic” music—whatever that means.

This sort of “identity politics set to music,” fed by pessimism about society and the working class, is especially fashionable in the middle-class Green milieu. Such nostrums are based on a worship of cultural backwardness, on theories about “unspoiled savages” who have not yet fallen victim to consumerism, do not possess a television and should never own one—for their own good, of course.

The Sinto guitarist Janko Lauenberger, whose children's bedroom was adorned with a large poster of Michael Jackson, once commented sarcastically that such “friends of the gypsies” still wanted us “to leap around the bush banging drums.”

After the monstrous crimes of the Nazis, it was very hard for most Sinti and Roma in Germany to concentrate on looking to the future. Too often they saw in the postwar offices and doctors' surgeries the faces of individuals they knew to be former Nazis. Sometimes they were the same people who had sent them or their parents to the concentration camps.

The music producer Siegfried Maeker, who encouraged Schnuckenack Reinhardt to form a Django band for concerts in the 1960s and was a formative figure in the development of German

gypsy swing, reported that Sinti and Roma in postwar Germany for the most part withdrew from public life. Often they even denied their identity, claiming instead to be Italian.

Häns'che Weiss was one of those Sinti who could reach out and win people over with his open, friendly heart and soul. This attitude greatly influenced his music. He built cultural bridges, which proved to be much more stable than the half-hearted promises of former “leftist” politicians who yesterday organized “multicultural” festivals and today brutally deport Roma. One or another of them undoubtedly still has an old Häns'che Weiss record in his or her collection.

Links:

Schnuckenack Reinhardt Quintett 1973 – Live: *Sweet Georgia Brown* (Casey, Bernie, Pinkard) Häns'che Weiss Quintett 1973, Musik deutscher Zigeuner – 5: *Illusionen* (Rotter / Mayer)
Häns'che Weiss Quintett 1973, Musik deutscher Zigeuner – 5: *De Man Devla* (Trad)
Häns'che Weiss Quintett 1977, Fünf Jahre Musik deutscher Zigeuner: *Lulu Swing* (Lulu Reinhardt) Kitty Winter & Gipsy Nova 1978: *Feel it*
Kitty Winter & Gipsy Nova 1978 : *Digno Tschirglo*
Dunja Blum und Bobby Falta 1979 – Live: *Dschane du ga*
Dunja Blum und Bobby Falta – Live: *Wave* (Jobim)
La Romanderie 1980 – Live: *It Don't Mean a Thing* (Ellington), *The Man I love* (Gershwin), *Dve Gitari* (russ. Trad)
„Duo Z” 1983 – Live : *Lustig wär das Zigeunerleben*
Titi Winterstein Quintett 1985: *Swing 85* (Titi Winterstein)
Häns'che Weiss Ensemble 1988: *S' Wonderful* (Gershwin)
Zipflo Reinhardt Trio 2009 – Live: *Nuages* (Django Reinhardt)
Menowin Fröhlich: Round'n'Round
Musikalischer Sinti-Nachwuchs aus den Niederlanden
Zigeunerfest Darmstadt 1979 – Part 1 Zigeunerfest Darmstadt 1979 - Part 2



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