

“A world without nations”—On the death of German jazz guitarist Coco Schumann

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The German jazz guitarist Coco Schumann (born Heinz Jakob Schumann) died January 29 at the age of 93. He remained active musically until near the end of his life and therefore ranks as a jazz musician with one of the longest musical biographies ever.

Schumann’s musical career began in Berlin in the 1930s. The Nazi dictatorship could not dampen the enthusiasm for jazz which had developed during the Weimar Republic era following World War I. Jazz had taken the place of operetta, musicians dared to jazz up traditional marching songs such as the “Berliner Luft (Berlin Air)” and radio was becoming increasingly popular.

The 1935 ban on broadcasts of what the Nazis termed “Nigger-Jazz” turned out to be unenforceable, Schumann notes in his autobiography, *The Ghetto Swinger*. Fans were crazy about the music and the import and export of records boomed. Whoever had the money, dressed “English.” Musical idols included Duke Ellington, the Chick Webb orchestra with a young Ella Fitzgerald, Artie Shaw, German-Austrian singer Horst Winter, Swiss bandleader Teddy Stauffer, English jazz trumpeter Nat Gonella, and The Golden Seven band.

What is today the Delphi Cinema in Berlin became a mecca for swing. Here, the 13-year-old Schumann first saw Stauffer’s band. Coco learnt the basics of drumming from a music-loving uncle who was a hairdresser by profession. Eventually, the boy was able to take his place in his uncle’s “gypsy band.”

Then came the guitar. At the age of 16, Coco received lessons in guitar from Hans Korseck, a swing-loving medical student who played in established bands and had met the jazz musicians and band leaders Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey during a stay in the US. In 1941 Korseck established the first German plectrum guitar school, only to die on the Eastern front a year later, aged just 31.

The encounter with violinist and composer Helmut Zacharias, a celebrated classic “child prodigy,” who also played jazz, was of huge importance for Schumann. His path now appeared set and consisted of music, music, music. Schumann was able to earn decent money in a band led by the Italian Tullio Mobiglia, a pupil of Coleman Hawkins and the “most beautiful saxophonist in the world.”

In March 1943, Schumann was arrested suddenly and confronted with social facts he had hitherto ignored. Officially, he was accused, among other things, of failing to wear the Star of David, compulsory for all Jews in Germany under the Nazis. In addition, Coco played forbidden music. His father, a former war veteran (and a convert to Judaism after marrying a Jewish woman), was able to prevent his son’s deportation to Auschwitz. As a consequence the young man was “merely” incarcerated in the Theresienstadt concentration camp.

Schumann always suspected his cousin’s contact with the anti-fascist resistance was the real reason for his arrest. Heinz Rotholz was a member of a Jewish resistance group led by Herbert Baum, which carried out an arson attack on the infamous anti-Communist propaganda exhibition “The Soviet Paradise.” Rotholz and most of the other members of the group

were quickly detained and executed. Schumann had once played guitar in this circle without knowing of their resistance work. An informer for the Nazis was also present.

In Theresienstadt, Schumann replaced the drummer in the “Ghetto Swingers” group, who had been deported to Auschwitz. Under the direction of Martin Roman, the former leader of the legendary Weintraub Syncopators, the band made a brief appearance in the Nazi propaganda film *Theresienstadt: A Documentary Film from the Jewish Settlement Area*. The filthy work was designed to hide from the public, at home and abroad, the true nature of the camp (officially designated a “re-education” camp).

The film’s nominal director, Kurt Geron (who had appeared in the 1928 premiere production of *The Threepenny Opera* and starred in Josef von Sternberg’s *The Blue Angel* in 1930), like most of the performers featured, was subsequently deported to Auschwitz and murdered. In October 1944 Schumann was transferred to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Once again, the Nazis’ SS needed musicians. One of his most lingering and horrifying memories was being forced to play music while prisoners were on their way to the gas chamber. The Nazis repeatedly demanded the song “La Paloma.” Schumann was later sent to Dachau and dispatched on one of the camp’s notorious death marches shortly before the collapse of the Third Reich.

Freed by American soldiers, Coco returned to Berlin and reunited with some former swing friends in an improvised bar amidst the rubble. Coco made no mention of his stay in a concentration camp. He continued doing what the war had interrupted: playing jazz. Having missed the development of bebop, Coco eagerly embraced this new music style. Helmut Zacharias wrote some songs in bebop style, and Schumann’s guitar idol was now Charlie Christian, who played with electric amplification—a novelty in Germany at the time.

Shortly afterward, the electric guitar sound of Chet Atkins and Les Paul arrived from the US. Both men quickly become idols in the 1950s. The crisp clean tone seemed to help clear away much of the dirt of the past. Exoticism in international guise was in demand: Italian coolness, Spanish passion, Caribbean music, Brazilian bossa nova. Swing and improvisation, according to Schumann, were suddenly out. He continued to play with Zacharias’ quartet as well as in other bands and for the radio. Now he became fascinated by Brazilian rhythms which allowed him to improvise. Zacharias said goodbye to bebop and stacked sweet-sounded violin tones one on top of another.

In terms of social development, Schumann could see no real change. In the Cold War, veteran Nazis had been rehabilitated in order to hunt down Communists. The first Nazi criminals condemned in the Nuremberg trials were released already in the 1950’s for “good behaviour” and the debate about German rearmament had begun. Schumann’s mother was denied a US visa because she had joined the East German Communist Party, the SED. Schumann emigrated with his wife and child to Australia, only to return a few years later because he missed his friends.

Coco played music for all occasions (with the exception of German folk music and country music which he disliked). In so doing he was able to determine the extent to which the musical world had “internalised” jazz. As one commentator remarked, he was “basically in touch with all the vagaries of music which developed over years and decades. For many entertainers, he was the essence of what they had to do in order to make a living out of their profession, whether it be playing schmaltzy melodies, all time favourites, oldies, or ‘experimental’ pop and rock.”

Schumann was once invited to play free jazz in the ‘60s, but could not cope with the type of “self-fulfillment” called for. Politically, he placed his hopes in the Social Democratic Party and supported SPD leader Willy Brandt in his election campaign.

In the 1970s he played on a Soviet cruise ship carrying Western tourists for the West German Neckermann company. Ten years earlier, the same captain had commanded a Soviet warship in the Bay of Pigs off the coast of Cuba. The supposed rapprochement between capitalism and “socialism” within the framework of Brandt’s new Ostpolitik (political orientation towards the east, including the Soviet Union) was a topic of conversation between the two men. The “communist” political officer agreed with Schumann that capitalism was bad, but that it was nice to have a million in the pocket.

Reaching 60, Schumann decided to play only music important to him. Returning to swing brought all sorts of memories to the surface. For over 40 years he had kept silent about the hell of the concentration camps. He told some of the story to his old friend Zacharias who was shocked. Journalists and the media suddenly turned to Schumann. Filmmaker John Jeremy interviewed Schumann for the documentary *Swing Under The Swastika* (1988). Schumann had an ambivalent relationship toward the federal cross of merit he was awarded in early 1989. A Germany, which had never seriously come to grips with its Nazi past, could never be his real home. He considered emigrating to the US.

The fact that the older Schumann increasingly sought to speak out publicly had more to do with the change in the political climate than just music. The intense official embrace of anti-communism following the capitalist reunification of Germany in 1989-90 encouraged right-wingers of all stripes. Schumann was unwelcome and there were even threats to fire-bomb his house. Out of instinct he did not go to the police. In 1994, during a visit to a resort, he met young people who turned out to be far-right Holocaust deniers. The group included several police officers.

In his 1997 autobiography, published in English in 2016 as *The Ghetto Swinger: A Berlin Jazz-Legend Remembers*, Schumann openly challenged all the lies and distortions surrounding the most terrible period of his life. He bluntly recalls his experiences. In so doing he expressly rejected the thesis of German collective guilt propagated, amongst others, by Daniel Goldhagen in *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, which was published in German one year earlier. Schumann relates how non-Jewish neighbours helped his family survive. He expressed his great admiration for unknown heroes of everyday life, such as his “Aryan” father, who openly refused to divorce his Jewish wife. The fact that Schumann, who as a Jew was denied a permit to play, was nevertheless able to perform publicly in Berlin until 1943, indicates that a form of hidden solidarity had developed in defiance of the all-embracing Nazi repression.

Schumann criticises the prominent German-Austrian musician and composer Peter Kreuder (“I do not need millions”). Among musicians, Schumann said, Kreuder—who wrote scores for some German 150 films—was known equally for his musical prowess, vanity and corruptibility. A member of the NSDAP since 1932, “one may say he [Kreuder] was a master of naïveté.” Schumann is also self-critical. In his youth he was interested only in music and would probably have become a fellow traveler of the Nazis, had that not been excluded due to his being Jewish.

Schumann also soberly counters the myth that all those who loved swing

must have automatically hated the Nazis. According to Schumann, there were fans of swing in the Hitler Youth movement who regarded themselves as the “real” Germans. “The ‘resistance’ on the part of ‘swingers’ was largely restricted to youthful rebellion. We insisted on our preferences and pleasures and felt a deep aversion to military hierarchies (...) Any broader vision was non-existent.”

There was always a way to defend their musical world, for Schumann a “world without nations.” During the war, American song titles were given innocuous German names and an early warning system was set up in the clubs to warn of any uninvited visit by the Nazis. An artistic provocation in 1941 was the Jewish hit “Joseph! Joseph!,” which was produced in Germany. With a revised title, “She wants neither flowers nor chocolate,” the song mocked the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels. Everybody knew it and Goebbels was outraged.

For certain Germans the first confrontation with political reality took place at the front gates of a concentration camp. Based on his bitter experiences, Schumann retained a finely tuned instinct regarding the danger of new right-wing moments and threats. His autobiography is well worth reading and very relevant to current political developments.

Musical links:

Jawohl meine Herrn by Hans Sommer/ Richard Busch

Artist: Die goldene Sieben (Rhythm guitar: Hans Korseck) (1937)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pXhEuXbKHqYQ>

Caravan by Duke Ellington

Artist: Tanz-Sinfonie-Orchester Peter Kreuder (1937)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N592TEV73CU>

The Flat Foot Floogee by Slim Gaillard / Slam Stewart / Bud Green

Artist: Teddy Stauffer with his Original Teddies (1938)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDJ2KH8WgCU>

She wants neither flowers nor chocolate by Hans Carste / Klaus S.

Richter

Interpret: Horst Winter with his orchestra (1941)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jShVZEZOKQ>

Swing To Bop by Charly Christian

Artist: Charly Christian (1941)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ce9Jtl9D6FQ>

Tullios Rhythmen by Tullio Mobiglia

Artist: Tullio Mobiglia with his Bar-Orchestra (1942)

Guitar: probably Coco Schumann

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQj7JqGYUsg>

Helmis Be-Bop Nr. 3 by Helmut Zacharias

Artist: Helmut Zacharias and the AMIGA-STAR-BAND (1948)

Guitar: Coco Schumann

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7EdIa0xwMQ>

World Is Waiting For The Sunrise by E. Seitz / Gene Lockhart

Artist: Les Paul & Mary Ford

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7iGXP_UBog4

Sandman by Pat Ballard

Artist: Chet Atkins (TV 1954)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-c66SJPUUI>

Moscow Nights by Vasily Pavlovich Solovyov-Sedoi

Artist: Coco Schumann’s “Radio-und Schallplatten-Quartett”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BFK9Vs_Y5iU

Coco Schumann: Live in Berlin (2012)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Og-U-YHMZeQ>



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