

STIL IN BERLIN

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Interview: Mark Reeder



A little bit of research into Berlin's music history, and Mark Reeder's name will probably appear. Since moving to Berlin from Manchester in 1978, he has worked as Germany's rep for Factory Records, toured with New Order, managed Malaria!, organized the first secret punk rock show in East Berlin, was certified 'subversive' by the Stasi, and produced the last record ever produced in East Germany (which was also the only record ever made by an Englishman in the DDR). And that was just before the wall came down. Since then, he was the one to discover Paul van Dyk in 1990, and sign him to his record label MFS, which was also responsible for coining the term 'trance music.' On top of that, he was also in his own band Die Unbekannten (later Shark Vegas), which has since developed its own cult status. I sat down with Mark, and after a few hours talking, hadn't even gotten past 1990. So get your Sunday coffee and prepare for a long but fascinating account of 80s underground music culture in Berlin, both East and West.

DN: How did you end up coming to Berlin in 1978?

MR: It was just a whim. Manchester was a pretty desperate place in the 70s. The prospects weren't looking so good. As it was getting towards the end of 1977, I was seeing the fire being burned out by so-called New Wave, which was rock music being disguised as something new. For instance Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers was just a normal pub band. I saw things going another way, and I wasn't very interested in it. I'd been interested in electronic music for quite a long time, and there was very little of it in the UK. Everything was coming from Germany. So I went to Germany to see if I could find it.

DN: So what did you find?

MR: I didn't. I got Edgar Froese's address in Schöneberg and I went and knocked on his door. I don't know why. But I thought if "I'm here, I might as well say hello." And his wife opened the door and said "He's not here, he's in England." So I never actually met him til years later. But after living here, I found that Berlin that was developing it's own little music scene.

DN: Was it different than what you left in England?

MR: It had the same kind of energy as England, but a different mentality. In England, everybody wanted to make a hit record and sell millions, whereas in Berlin they wanted to make a record and express themselves. It was very refreshing. It wasn't driven by commerciality, it was driven by artistic expression. Certainly there were bands who, later on, wanted to become popstars. But bands like Mania D and P1/E made really different records. The records still sound refreshing today. I just wanted to find out more, and find more people making this kind of stuff.

DN: Where was the scene located then?

MR: The clubs were SO36 and Exxess. SO36 was always a real dive, and still is. Exxess is now a gay sauna on Kurfürstenstraße. It kind of looked like the "Bela Lugosi's Dead" video that was used at the beginning of The Hunger with David Bowie & Catherine Deneuve.

DN: You also worked as the German representative for Factory Records. How did this come about?

MR: Tony Wilson and Rob Gretton from Factory had sort of designated me as the German representative. It had just started, sort there were just one or two releases, but since I was in Germany, it made sense for me to promote whatever it was they planned on doing. I worked with Factory til 83, just before they released Blue Monday. I knew it was something I couldn't handle. The idea had been that I start Factory Germany, but they weren't prepared to give any money to do it. They wanted me to pay for it, and if it worked they'd get all the money, and if it didn't it would be on my back.

But generally, the myth of the label was much bigger than what happened. The label made a loss on every single record they released. They made a loss on Blue Monday, which was the biggest selling 12" ever, and still is today. Financially,

Factory was a total disaster. They did make money, but it was all squandered on ridiculous things. There were studio sessions in the Bahamas for records which were never produced, and Peter Saville making a record cover would take months of design, and the cost of the record cover would be more than the cost of the record. So all this kind of crippled the label. It was very nice to look at and great to collect, but as a business enterprise it was a real disaster.

DN: How did you start performing here?

MR: I played a gig at the last night of the Excess Club, on Dec. 31 1980. Everybody who did it was in a band. I was asked as the rep from Factory Germany to do a couple of songs. They knew I'd played in a band before, so they asked me to just come up with something. I asked a friend of mine who was a drummer, Thomas Wydler, who is now with Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, and we wrote a song. It was actually a completely stupid song, but the organizer of the night thought it was really good. He must have been really drunk. So he asked if we'd perform again at this Konzert zur Einheit der Nation, on the 17th of June, 1981, at SO36.

A couple of months after the first gig, I bumped into Alistair, who I'd met a few years earlier but not seen since then. We started chatting and I told him I had a gig coming up and asked him if he could sing. So he immediately crooned "Strangers In The Night," and I said "Brilliant, you've got a gig." So I invited him over to my flat, I taught him how to play the bass, and we wrote a few songs. The show was a disaster. I had tuned my guitar backstage, where it was much cooler, and when I went out to the stage, it was a million degrees due to all the lights, so my guitar immediately went out of tune. Then I switched the wrong program on the drum machine, so it was playing something completely different. We had no idea what we were supposed to playing. But people thought it was some sort of avant-garde thing, playing against the rhythm kind of set. So much so, that the woman who owned Monogam Records, Elisabeth, thought it was fantastic and released our first two records as Die Unbekannten.

DN: What was it like as a foreigner here in the 70s and 80s? I imagine there weren't as many as there are today.

MR: There were foreigners here, obviously. But Alistair, myself, and two guys called Trevor and Piers, who played in a band called White Russia -- we were the only English people who got involved in this little scene here. Everyone else was Germans, and they were only really interested in what they were doing.

DN: Was there a difference between the music they were making and what you and Alistair were doing with Die Unbekannten?

MR: For sure. We come from a different school, a different musical upbringing. The way we wrote our songs was really British. It wasn't like the way Mania D wrote their songs, for example. And of course our lyrics were in English. We were considered insider outsiders. Being inside this scene, and accepted for that, but also something quite outside, as we were very English.

DN: In 1982 you also organized a secret concert disguised as a religious service by Die Toten Hosen in East Berlin, which was the first concert by a western punk band in East Berlin. What was the connection to East Berlin?

MR: I had met some people in East Berlin years before; I went over there quite often. They were fans of John Peel and Factory. They wanted to listen to alternative music which they couldn't buy in their local record shop.

DN: Why wasn't punk allowed in East Germany?

MR: It officially didn't exist even. It was seen as a throwback to capitalist society. Punk rock equaled unemployment, and in the Arbeiter-und-Bauern-Staat, there's no such thing as unemployment. Even if you didn't do anything at your job, you had to have one. For something like punk rock to exist in East Germany, it meant a failing of their system. So that's why they removed anything that's to do with punk rock. New wave eventually became a more acceptable term, but that's because it was new wave, and not punk. Punk being a revolutionary kind of sound, and new wave.

DN: How did they get to know that this type of music existed in the first place then?

MR: They taped it off the radio, or got people to bring cassettes over, or records if they were lucky. Most of the time John Peel played music you couldn't buy anywhere anyway. But the John Peel Show was like this religious service they heard every week. They heard it from the radio, through the BBC world service, and on the British forces radio. So they got a double dose every week. They would sit there with their cassette players and record everything on the show. On that show they would hear music that they would never get to hear again.

DN: So how did you meet these people?

MR: I saw this one kid once on the U-Bahn when I was in East Berlin who looked a bit punky, but like a nice punk, not like punk rock's image is today. He just had a bit of spiky hair and drainpipe trousers on, but that was radical enough in East Berlin at that time. He obviously had this passion for this type of music, so when he got off the train, I just followed him and asked him about the underground scene in East Berlin. "I bet he knows where there's a gig tonight," I thought. He said "there are no gigs, there's no subculture here at all." So I told him to let me know if something's happening ever. I gave him my address, and a couple of weeks later I got a letter from this girl who said "I'm interested in this music, I'd like to meet you." Basically they wanted to see who I was and figure out what it was I wanted. So they set up this meeting in the Palast der Republik. In the cafe there was big beautiful round bar, where you could have all these obscure East German cocktails. So we sat there and had a lengthy chat about music, and I discovered a lot of things through her.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-RD425-0019
Foto: Kohls, Ulrich | 25. April 1976

DN: What kind of scene was happening in East Berlin?

MR: There was no real punk rock scene there at all at the time. There was just a small group of kids who would get together and listen to John Peel and dream about Depeche Mode. So I thought, "there's something there." I had heard about what was known as a Blues Messe, like a Blues Mass, in this church in Rummelsburg. So I went to see this priest, and asked if it was possible if I brought a band over from the West. He didn't see how we could do it, as we of course couldn't bring our instruments over; The border wouldn't let us. But we arranged to borrow the instruments from people living within the East.

An electric guitar was something that was out of the reach for an average East German to own, but we somehow arranged to get all the instruments together. We found people who knew people who knew someone else. In East Germany, you had to go through a process to get permission to play in front of an audience. It was kind of a group of men in brown suits who would watch you and judge if you were proficient enough, what your lyrics were like, what your music is like. It was a huge process just to determine if you were worthy of a piece of paper which would allow you to buy an electric guitar. These people that we eventually found with the equipment, they ended up becoming Rammstein years later.

DN: How did the gig go?

MR: When the day came, I said to Die Toten Hosen, "We'll go over in threes, you don't know anybody, you're just coming as a tourist. And if anybody didn't get in, the show is canceled." We made it through and went to the Blues Messe. We had to do a bit of praying, and then they could play. It was really emotional. It drove me to tears, to see that we pulled this off. This gig for these kids who would normally never have this opportunity to see this band in their life. That we managed to pull this off, and go against the authorities and have this band play in this place.

DN: And they never found out?

MR: Later on, when I got to see my Stasi file, I learned that from the very first encounter I had with this kid on the U-Bahn, he actually was an Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter for the Stasi. And at that gig, there were also kids who were spying for the Stasi. They had to, due to the activities they'd been involved in previously, in trying to be a punk in East Berlin. It was not an easy task. You weren't even allowed to look like a punk. If you went anywhere near Alexanderplatz looking like a punk, you were immediately removed. I met kids who were arrested and carted off and given an Alexanderplatz-verbot just for wearing a spiky armband.

DN: Why Alexanderplatz in particular?

MR: Because it was the main focal point for all the tourists. Any Western tourist would go to see the TV tower, and even the East German tourists visiting Berlin would go there. So they certainly didn't want any East Germans to see punk rock in East Germany. There were huge cameras all around Alexanderplatz, so they could see anything that was going on. That atmosphere was obviously quite oppressive.

DN: So why did they let you in the country if they had a file on you and knew what you were doing?

MR: They were very interested in what I was doing. I was classed as subversive, out to corrupt the youth of East Germany. The Stasi thought I was trying to infiltrate the political underground, because when I had this first encounter on the U-Bahn and asked for the underground, they thought I was referring to the political underground. They had no idea that such a thing as a music underground could even exist. Obviously they were very interested in my activities, and that's why I was never stopped going over, because they wanted to find out who and where and what I was doing, to try and draw something together. I only found this out later, when I saw my Stasi file.

DN: Did a punk rock underground ever emerge in East Berlin?

MR: Of course, more and more. But it was a real fight. It was very politically driven, in a different sense than it was in England. In England it was seen as sort of a fashion thing, but in East Germany the whole momentum behind it was freedom of speech.

DN: Do you think that this connection between the underground and politics has changed? Is there such a thing as an underground anymore even?

MR: There's too many different opportunities today for an underground like there used to be to exist. It had something to do with buying records I think. Today you

don't ever have to buy music, so it has no value any more. Now, the only value is in being elitist enough to have something which is new that you think everybody should be listening to. But in the 80s, when you had to buy music, it had a greater value. A group would have to get so far as to actually make a record. Today music is just a throwaway. The value of music has changed, and the meaning of having a musical revolution has changed with it.

Music is all over the place today. It used to be a political expression, as well as a generational expression. It expressed a radical change in people's mentality. That's a bit confused these days. There isn't an apparent statement in music today. It's there, but it's not apparent. For that to arrive again, I think we'd have to have a lot of hardcore political changes happening.

Mark Reeder will be releasing a new album in the next week, "Five Point One," which features a selection of his remixes. A rare Shark Vegas track has also recently been re-released on Strut Records' Fac.Dance compilation.