

*Part Two*

*Tuning In: Words, Sounds &  
Images*

## Utopia and Disillusion in the Songs of Gundermann: From the Brigade Feuerstein Productions in the GDR to his Solo Albums (1990s)

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This essay considers the song-writing aesthetic developed by protest singer Gerhard Gundermann, whose work started in the GDR and ended in united Germany, from a music-based as well as a personal, i.e., experiential perspective. The text helps contextualize the interview with Laila Stieler, who wrote the script for Andreas Dresen's 2018 film devoted to Gundermann. In her interview, published in English in this volume for the first time, she talks about her experience in the making of this film.

**Keywords:** Gundermann, GDR music scene, *Liedermacher*, Hoyerswerda, *Baggerfahrer*, Lausitz region, *Brigade Feuerstein*, *Liedertheater*, Hans-Eckardt Wenzel and Steffen Mensching, *Kulturfabrik*.

This article documents my fascination with the phenomenon of the East German protest singer Gerhard Gundermann, looking at songs he wrote over the course of his career, firstly as a member of the group Brigade Feuerstein in the GDR and then as a solo artist up until his premature death in 1998. It will constitute an introductory investigation into how Gundermann developed a song-writing aesthetic which bridged two fundamentally contrasting systems: the GDR of the 1970s and 80s and unified Germany of the 1990s. With their dual focus on individual and community his songs contemplated the possibilities and limits of one's ability to act to change

circumstances. This related to his own generation who had been born into (and constrained by) the structures of the GDR – the same people who later became ‘the losers’ of unification amidst the deindustrialisation of the East at the hands of capitalism.

I began my PhD research on GDR political song at Sheffield University in autumn 1991. I had already performed as a musician myself earlier that year at the annual Festival of the Political Song (now renamed the Zwischen-Welt-Festival) in Berlin. I had been invited on account of my connections to the East German folk scene. As a student of German at the University of Edinburgh in the early 1980s I had spent my year abroad (1982-83) at the Wilhelm Pieck University in Rostock where I had performed extensively in student clubs and festivals as a member of the university’s Lyrik-Song-Gruppe. It was there that I gained an insider’s knowledge into the bureaucratic structures of playing live music in the GDR, the artistic evaluation process (“Einstufung”)—effectively a political vetting—involved in gaining a license to perform in public and the constant monitoring of lyrics and repertoire by cultural functionaries.<sup>1</sup>

Returning for my graduate research, after 1991, I discovered a radically changed landscape. The fall of the Berlin Wall meant the *Liedermacher* (political singer/songwriters) were now free to write about what they wanted, but many struggled in the search for new

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<sup>1</sup> For more on these structures and processes See David Robb, “Censorship, Dissent and the Metaphorical Language of GDR Rock,” in *Popular Music in Eastern Europe: Breaking the Cold War Paradigm*, edited by Ewa Mazierska (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 109–28.

audiences and themes to write about. Many of them didn't make it, the ground having completely shifted from under their feet. The game of couching political messages in metaphorical lyrics—widespread in the GDR due to censorship—was now no longer relevant. Audiences had moved on quickly. Only those singer/songwriters survived who were able to adapt their art form to the new political reality.

I returned to the *Zwischen-Welt-Festival* the following year in spring 1992, this time primarily to do research. As a result of the festival being shunned by the media as well as funders (having been supported by the Free German Youth up until 1990) there was a hint of a siege mentality, a general atmosphere of “us against the world” amongst the performers, festival organisers and spectators. A great many I spoke to, having lost their jobs, were now involved in government-funded “ABM” temporary jobs (“Arbeitsbeschaffungsmaßnahmen”) to facilitate re-entry to employment. Many felt patronised by the new omnipresent West German politicians setting the economic agenda and the media voices shaping cultural discourse. In a nutshell, the festival had no money and the ex-GDR performers were obliged to play for expenses only. The main goal, which many expressed to me, was to keep the culture of political song alive, which artists, functionaries and audiences alike had nurtured at this festival and in the wider GDR club scene for years. The genre had enjoyed an ambiguous status in the GDR between conformity and resistance: on one hand, promoted by the state as revolutionary heritage, on the other, offering the musicians a means of voicing social critique, albeit often in a veiled way (Robb, 2007). Now the singer/song-writers faced difficulties on several fronts: as well as the aforementioned issues there was the additional factor that the genre of folk and protest song was viewed as

passé by the youth: as the music of their parents' generation that had grown up in the 1960s and 1970s (Robb, 2007).

It was at this time—spring 1992—that I first came across Gerhard Gundermann. Over the months, I managed to piece together his story: After having failed in his bid to become an officer in the GDR Army (1973-75) he had returned to civilian life, becoming a member of the Singeklub Hoyerswerda before leading the *Liedertheater* group Brigade Feuerstein from 1978 onwards. In this period he became famous for having two simultaneous careers as a *Liedermacher* and as a *Baggerfahrer* (operator of an excavator) in an open-face mine in the Lausitz region. He released his first solo album *Männer, Frauen and Maschinen* in 1988 and had just completed his second, *Einsame Spitze*, in spring 1992. On hearing it, I was struck by the natural soulfulness of his voice (quite different from the folk or chanson-orientated singing styles that characterised most other *Liedermacher*). Eager to experience him live, a friend of mine, a West German social worker living in East Berlin, warned me that Gundi was visually not exactly what one would expect of an acclaimed musical icon. Indeed, this ordinary-looking, often mumbling performer did not come across as self-possessed as he sounded on record. The East German public, however, was well trained in looking beyond the façade.

I discovered how Gundermann had been cultivating his audience since the late-1970s in his local industrial town of Hoyerswerda, where his group Brigade Feuerstein had regularly hosted their “Spektakulum” events: productions, concerts and children’s shows at their own youth club venue nicknamed Feuersteins Musik Palast (FMP). With a Brecht-influenced conceptual approach they saw their

*Liedertheater*<sup>2</sup> projects as a “soziales Laboratorium” by way of which artists must not separate their problems from those of their audience.<sup>3</sup> All working in full-time jobs (Dietrich), the group members brought their working experience into their songs and sketches. The spectators—friends, colleagues, local music enthusiasts and the general public—were frequently encouraged to voice their opinions on the GDR-specific problems highlighted in the productions. In this way Feuerstein nurtured a close bond with their audience, one that Gundermann was to grow substantially as a solo *Liedermacher* in the post-unification years.

His audience was well-attuned to his metaphorical lyrical approach, which he had developed since his early days in Brigade Feuerstein. With the use of intertextuality, for example, he reflected a practice common among GDR *Liedermacher* and rock groups whereby critical allusions to the present could be couched in motifs or fables from literary works. Wolf Biermann and Bettina Wegner, for example, had both used the “Icarus” analogy in songs to symbolise political impotence and crushed ideals in the GDR (Robb, 2007). In GDR pop music, too, a well-known instance of such intertextuality was in the lyrics written by

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<sup>2</sup> *Liedertheater* was a hybrid form between political song, agitprop theatre and cabaret which began as an offshoot from the GDR *Singebewegung* in the mid-1970s. Its most famous pioneers were Schicht from Dresden, Brigade Feuerstein from Hoyerswerda and Karls Enkel from Berlin. See David Robb, *Zwei Clowns im Lande des verlorenen Lachens. Das Liedertheater Wenzel & Mensching* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Personal interview with former Brigade Feuerstein member Hugo Dietrich, 5 February 2020.

Ulrich Plenzdorf for the Puhdys' song "Wenn ein Mensch lebt" (1973) in the film of the same year *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* with its reference to the passage "Alles hat seine Zeit" (Everything has its time) from the Lutheran Bible. The text implicitly questions the state leadership's projected image of the GDR as "Sieger der Geschichte" (champion of history) whose time—in the wake of a growing economy in the early 1970s—had effectively arrived (Robb, 2016). Such a tension between socialist ideal and reality was the subject of Gundermann's early *Liedertheater* experiments. In 1976 he adapted the Faustian tale of Jurij Brězan's *Krabat oder die Verwandlung der Welt* for the Singeklub Hoyerswerda's production "Krabat und seine Geschichten" (1976) which, two years later, was further developed into "Geschichten aus den Koraktor" (1978), the group now appearing under the name of Brigade Feuerstein.<sup>4</sup> The story is set in the fictitious town of Grauingrün and is clearly adapted to reflect present day reality of the GDR. The main figure Franziska, inspired by Brigitte Reimann's novel *Franziska Linkerhand*,<sup>5</sup> is characterised by her high idealism. Initially the child, immersed in her imaginary world, is waiting for her friend, the dragon Anton, to bring her "das Stück vom

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<sup>4</sup> The unpublished manuscripts for these *Liedertheater* productions, all typed by Gundermann himself, have been collected by Reinhard "Pfeffi" Ständer and are available in the Gundermann Archive held in the Kulturfabrik, Hoyerswerda. They are kept in folders, no shelf marks or serial numbers.

<sup>5</sup> Simone Hain also mentions the influences of Brezan and Reimann on Gundermann in her article "Unsereins. Gerhard Gundermann und das wahre Leben", *Berliner Debatte* 11, no. 5/6 (2000): 176. See also Brigade Feuerstein's song production "Franziska-Lieder" (1979).

Himmel"; slowly, she develops into a young working woman who – in keeping with the socialist spirit of the times—feels entitled to her own share of the sky: "Franziska, bleib stehn und sieh dich um/ sieh deine graugrüne Stadt/ Der Himmel darüber ist Volkseigentum / daß jeder vom Himmel was hat (Franziska stand still and look around / look at your grey-green town / The sky above is property of the people / so that all have a share of the sky)."<sup>6</sup> In the scenes, reminiscent of a "Lehrstück", Franziska functions as a pro-active socialist heroine. In contrast to her boss's optimism, she chides the complacency of the workers and their lack of direction and revolutionary spirit. Through her words there is no mistaking the passionate belief of the young worker Gundermann in the GDR's historical mission and his despair at behavioural traits of those who stand in its way:

Mir gefällt nicht, daß ihr euren Karren zieht,  
und dabei mit dem Rücken in Fahrtrichtung lauft,  
dieses erzeugt in mir die Vermutung, daß wenn  
eine Wand in Sicht käme, jeder schnell den Strang  
loslassen würde, um mit seinem Arsch als erster  
an ebendieser Wand zu sein.

Außerdem seht ihr auch nicht, wohin ihr  
eigentlich fahrt mit diesem Karren, euch genügt,  
daß es in Richtung besserer Zeiten gehn soll.

Ihr sieht immer nur nach hinten, und damit auf  
euch, die ihr auf dem Karren mitfahrt, und ihr  
achtet darauf, daß auch immer schön vorsichtig

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<sup>6</sup> "Schlußlied", from "Geschichten aus den Koraktor." See footnote 3.



und nicht zu schnell gefahren wird, daß es euch die Knochen nicht durcheinander schüttelt [...]

Und mir gefällt auch nicht, da ihr nur alleine auf dem Karren sitzt, wo bleibt den da der (Che) und der (Salvador) und der (Carlos)?<sup>7</sup> Ich meine, wir sind stark genug, daß auch ein wenig Weltrevolution bei uns mitfahren kann. So, das wars.<sup>8</sup>

(I don't like how when you pull your cart your backs are always in the direction of travel. This makes me think that if you saw a wall every one of you would drop the rope to be the first to rest your arse against that same wall.

Neither do you ever actually look where you're going on this cart. It's enough for you that it's going in the direction of better times ahead.

You're always looking behind you—that is at your fellow travellers on the cart, and you always make sure that we drive cautiously, never so fast that your bones would shudder.

And I also don't like that you only sit by yourselves on the cart. What's happened to him (Che) and him (Salvador) and him (Carlos)? I

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<sup>7</sup> These are references to the Latin American revolutionary figures of Che Guevara and Salvador Allende who also appear in this scene alongside Carlos and Franziska.

<sup>8</sup> "Geschichten aus den Koraktor." See footnote 3.

mean we're strong enough to take a bit of world  
revolution along with us. So, that was it.)

By the early 1980s, however, Gundermann's identification with pro-active figures from literature was evolving in a more socially critical direction. In "Lancelots Zwischenbilanz" from 1981 there was already a sense of resignation. Here Gundermann implicitly refers to the top-down approach of the government which excludes his generation from participation in political affairs of the state. The subject Lancelot complains he has waited for fifteen years to be called for action. His utopian dreams have not been realised, there is no genuine news in the state-controlled newspapers and his red carnation has withered:

Seit 15 Jahren 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 lange verdorrte  
Und die Zeitung halte ich noch  
in der Hand  
Obwohl ich sie schon nicht mehr  
lesen kann  
Und starre in den Nebel wann  
kommt der Mann  
Der sagt wir brauchen dich jetzt  
bist du dran

For 15 years I've stood at the  
world clock  
And I'm no longer so young  
And I wait and I wait  
And I still wear the red carnation  
on my helmet  
Although it's long been  
withering  
And I still hold the newspaper in  
my hand  
Although I can't read it  
any more  
And stare into the fog when will  
the man come  
Who says we need you now it's  
your turn.

With the "Warten" motif the song echoes the theme of a "passive and alienated waiting" (Leeder 53) as expressed in texts of the 1980s such as those of Heiner Müller and Hans-Eckardt Wenzel (Robb, 2007) as well as by the rock group

City (Robb, 2016). The subject casts doubt on whether he has the will or energy to keep on fighting for the cause:

Und ich weiß  
nicht, ob ich noch singen kann  
bis in eine Seele  
Und ich weiß  
nicht, ob ich noch springen kann  
bis an eine Kehle  
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.<sup>9</sup>

And I don't know  
if I'm still able to sing  
into a soul  
And I don't know  
if I can still jump up  
onto someone's throat  
And I don't know  
if I can still set off  
for my destination  
And I don't know  
if I can still wait  
Until I'm counted by the world.

The story of Gundermann's criticisms of the political leadership in his work place leading to his expulsion from

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<sup>9</sup> "Lancelots Zwischenbilanz" (1981) in *Gundermann. Das Liederbuch*. Teil 2 (Berlin: Buschfunk Verlag, 1999), no. 21.

the Party in 1984 have been widely documented.<sup>10</sup> Simon Hain writes how a turning point in the history of Brigade Feuerstein was the *Liedertheater* production “Eine Macht Schicht” (A Power Level)<sup>11</sup> from 1983 which she describes as “eine poetische Abrechnung mit der Kommandozentrale des Tagebaus” (a poetic reckoning with the coal mine’s central control office) (Hain, 2000, 186). Hain lucidly describes the rigid hierarchy of the brown coal production system in the GDR with its numerous ranks reminiscent of the army (Hain 183) which provided the political background for Gundermann’s ideas in the play. The main thrust of the criticism in “Eine Macht Schicht,” the prototype song-play that grew into “Eine Sehfahrt ist lustig”<sup>12</sup> in 1984, is the difference in power levels between “oben” und “unten” in society, as discussed in the dialogues between Big and Little Klaus.<sup>13</sup> The song “Demokratischer Tango”, for example, laments the contradiction that those in power have left their people behind. In the final verse – one of the main jokes of the show – the Party’s centralist way of governing is lampooned:

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Hans-Dieter Schütt, *Tankstelle für Verlierer. Gespräche mit Gerhard Gundermann* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 2011); Andreas Leusink, ed., *Gundermann. Von jedem Tag will ich was haben, was ich nicht vergesse* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> This is a word play from “eine Nachtschicht” (meaning “a night shift”) which plays on the other meaning of “Schicht” as “level”.

<sup>12</sup> This title “Sehfahrt” is an ironic pun on the word “Seefahrt” (voyage). With didactic associations typical of a *Lehrstück* it literally means a “journey of seeing”.

<sup>13</sup> See manuscript of these productions in the Gundermann Archive.

“Das ist so eine Sache, mit der Demokratie, / Sie ist ein junges Mädchen, noch nicht aufgeblüht, / sie hat einen Kumpel, der Zentralismus heißt, / Doch den heiratet sie nicht, weil der sie immer beißt” (That’s the thing about democracy / She’s a young woman, not yet in bloom, / She has a pal called centralism, / But she doesn’t marry him because he always bites her).<sup>14</sup> With the scathing critique of the Party in songs such as “Bruttosozialprodukt,” where achieving targets is prioritised over safety in the work place, or “So muß es sein,” which demands an end to spineless bureaucrats who do not answer to the public, Gundermann cemented his reputation as a songwriter with the interest of the working people at heart.

Typical for agitprop, “Eine Sehfahrt ist lustig” contains a strong didactic element. “Children,” for example, sung to the tune of the famous T. Rex song, implicitly challenges the “Kinder der Revolution” to take matters into their own hands, to resist their lack of intellectual stimulation as a result of not being engaged at a political level: “Wie wollt ihr siegen, wenn ihr gehirnamputiert / In den Fabriken vergangenheit produziert” (How do you want to win when, with amputated brains, / You produce the past in the factories). Similarly to Franziska’s key speech from “Koraktor,” the song derides the people’s passivity and lack of direction: “Ich seh, ihr dreht euch, doch mit dem Arsch an die Wand, / Und ihr bewegt euch, den eignen Schwanz in der Hand. / Wohin wollt ihr, Kinder der Revolution, wohin, wo?” (I see you turn around with your arse to the wall, / And you move, with your own dick in your hand. / Where do you want to go, children of the revolution, where, where?).

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<sup>14</sup> “Demokratischer Tango.” From *Eine Sehfahrt ist lustig*. See footnote 3.

For those who knew the GDR and were acquainted with the rigid rules, restrictions and vetting processes concerning what was allowed to be performed in public,<sup>15</sup> it is perhaps startling that the directness and vehemence of the criticism of “Eine Sehfahrt ist lustig” was tolerated. What would have clearly been to the group’s advantage was, in a formal sense, their artistic self-orientation within the socialist tradition of *Kampflied*, agitprop and *Lehrstück*. As Klaus-Peter Schwarz (1999, 44) has described, Gundermann was well connected to the Akademie der Künste in East Berlin which promoted the GDR’s revolutionary artistic heritage and supported such “freie Theaterprojekte” as Brigade Feuerstein, Schicht and Karls Enkel. Indeed, the legendary Brecht singer Ernst Busch had even requested that Brigade Feuerstein play at his funeral in 1980.<sup>16</sup> Corresponding to such credentials, the group was one of the GDR “Auslandskader” singing groups who were allowed to perform in the West (see Schütt 90). Conceptually, too, the fact that Gundermann, up until this point, had not yet relinquished his communist utopianism, as expressed in some of the aforementioned songs and scenes, was also a source of political protection. Here his inner conviction, despite his rift with the Party, that socialism would still be victorious, is very evident.<sup>17</sup> In this

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<sup>15</sup> See Robb, as footnote 1.

<sup>16</sup> Personal interview with Ingo “Hugo” Dietrich, 6 February 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Another quite practical consideration, as Hugo Dietrich relates, was that group member Bernd Nitzsche was Stadtrat für Kultur in Hoyerswerda and in this respect a “Schutzschild gegenüber dem MfS.” Dietrich, “Viel Arbeit für ein Lächeln. Unsere Zeit bei der Brigade Feuerstein,” in Leusink (2018), 51.

respect, the *Liedertheater* productions of Brigade Feuerstein provide a valuable historical documentation of Gundermann's thought-processes during this period.

Brigade Feuerstein performed three further *Liedertheater* productions "Lebenslauf" (1985), "Männer, Frauen und Maschinen" (1986) and "Entdeckungen" (1988), the second of these providing the name for Gundermann's first solo album in 1988. This was followed by his lyrical collaboration with the rock group Silly on their acclaimed album *Februar* in 1989, which considerably increased his cudos amongst music fans generally—his reputation previously having been confined to *Liedermacher* circles. Alongside Pankow's *Aufruhr in den Augen*, this was one of two albums that summed up the sense of endgame in 1989, as the disaffected increasingly applied to leave the GDR. Gundermann's biting texts on *Februar* vented his generation's fury at the GDR government's intransigence as it doggedly resisted the *glasnost* and *perestroika* reforms Gorbachov had introduced in the USSR. The song "SOS" uses the metaphor of a boat, a "Narrenschiff"<sup>18</sup>, sailing to its doom, while "Ein Gespenst geht um" parodies the famous quotation from Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*: "Es geht ein Gespenst / In der Mitropa um. / Es spukt / Auf dem Friedhof der Träume" (There's a ghost going round / In the Mitropa / It spits / On the cemetery of dreams).<sup>19</sup> The

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<sup>18</sup> Klaus Peter Schwarz (1999) lauds the professional quality of Gundermann's lyrics in this song comparing it to an earlier much less refined version of the lyrics in the song "Schwarze Galeere" from 1980, 46.

<sup>19</sup> The word "Mitropa" is a pun on "Europa" from Marx and Engel's original line: "Ein Gespenst geht um in Europa." Mitropa was the name of the catering company for Deutsche Reichsbahn, the state railway in the GDR. It

song “Traumteufel” portrays a land bereft of inspiration with its metaphor of winter and the dying forest. Here Gundermann links his observations on political mismanagement to mankind’s misuse of nature, which was to become a more prominent theme in his songs of the 1990s:

Ich hab geträumt,  
Daß der Kaiser lange tot ist.  
Nur sein Double sitzt noch auf dem  
Thron.  
Der sieht gut aus,  
Obwohl er ein Idiot ist.  
Und spielt so gerne mit'm roten  
Telefon.

[...]

Ich hab geträumt  
Der Winter war gegangen  
Und der Minister, der gestern noch  
gelacht,  
Hat sich an seinem  
Schreibtisch aufgehangen,  
Weil der Wald nicht mehr wußte, wie  
man Blätter macht.<sup>20</sup>

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managed restaurants in railway stations and dining cars on trains.

<sup>20</sup> See Gundermann’s comments on this song in his interview with Schütt, 114.



I dreamt  
That the Kaiser had been dead a  
long time  
Only his double sits on the throne.  
He looks good,  
Although he is an idiot  
And likes to play with a red  
telephone

[...]

I dreamt  
The winter had passed  
And the minister who yesterday  
still laughed,  
Hanged himself  
At his desk,  
Because the forest no longer knew  
how to make leaves.

As the events of the *Wende* in autumn 1989 unfolded, Gundermann took an active part in the demonstrations, supporting the newly formed civil rights organisation Neues Forum and reading out the political demands of the so-called "Resolution" before concerts. In 1990 he toured with the Berlin rock group Wilderer as his backing band. Due to his straddling of the genres of rock music and political song it was apt that Gundermann enlisted Uwe Hassbecker and Ritchie Barton from Silly to produce his 1992 album *Einsame Spitze* as a return favour for his work on *Februar*. With its immaculate production, musicianship

and high level of song-writing this album stood out starkly amongst *Liedermacher* offerings of that time and set the tone for a series of CDs Gundermann was to release throughout the 1990s up until his premature death in 1998.

A major theme that he grapples with on these albums is that of the “Sieger” and “Verlierer” in society. In the Brigade Feuerstein years the identification with literary action heroes such as Franziska, Ilja Muromez<sup>21</sup> from Russian folklore, and Lancelot had been an intrinsic part of Gundermann’s narrative role-play. In interview he explained the attractiveness of such figures: the public identified with their heroism but also understood the aspect of illusion, namely that these characters were also flawed (Schütt 121). In a separate interview he presents this problem from a slightly different perspective. On one hand he himself had always been fascinated by people who seize the moment and do things, “die zu denjenigen gehören, an denen alles hängt, auch alles an Last” (the ones whom everything depends on, who also take on the burden). On the other hand this should not lose sight of the actual heroism of people who “einfach still und leise ihr mühsames Ding machen” (quietly and softly do their own laborious thing). These people are intrinsic to the working of a healthy society, but are left on the scrapheap by the political system (Schütt 158–59).

This contradiction provided the background for Gundermann to address the “Sieger und Verlierer” opposition in the early 1990s where his songs spoke to the so-called “losers” of unification: East German workers who had been doubly let down, firstly by state socialism and now by the empty promises of capitalism. However, this

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<sup>21</sup> “Ilja Muromez” (1977) in *Gundermann. Das Liederbuch*. Teil 2, no. 45.

was not a despondent, self-pitying position, but rather one that challenged the social status quo in a life-affirming way that displayed alternative philosophical approaches to viewing and understanding the world.<sup>22</sup>

In the spring of 1992, the discussion about the winners and losers of unification was already in full swing in the public realm. Performers such as Gundermann as well as the duo Hans-Eckardt Wenzel and Steffen Mensching (former members of the *Liedertheater* group Karls Enkel) encapsulated this problem, similarly to their approach in the GDR, by the use of creative intertextual techniques. In May 1992 in the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin Wenzel and Mensching performed a production inspired by Rimbaud's *Une Saison en Enfer* entitled "Aufenthalt in der Hölle." Here a world is portrayed in which everyone tries to act like a winner, but all are in fact prisoners of a hellish existence. Wenzel and Mensching sang: "Nur der ist ein verlorener Mann / Der in der Haut des Siegers tanzen kann" (He is but a lost man / who can dance in the skin of the winner) (Robb, 2007, 259-60). Gundermann, too, dealt with this subject in the song "Der siebte Samurai" from 1993. Using the metaphor of the warrior from Akira Kurosawa's epic film *Seven Samurai* (1954) who is reluctantly forced by the public to return to battle, Gundermann sings: "Gib mir die versteckten Stiefel wieder / Da draussen schreit mein letzter Tag / Ach ich käme doch so gerne wieder / Her zu dir / Die keine Sieger mag" (Go find my hidden jackboots / Outside my last day's howling loud / How I'd love to come back home to you / The one who doesn't like winners).

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<sup>22</sup> In interview Gundermann stated: "Ich möchte gern so etwas sein wie eine Tankstelle für Verlierer" (I'd like to be something like a filling station for losers), Schütt, 39.

Another theme Gundermann deals with is the dashed expectations of past and present. In this respect his song "Pferd aus Holz" functions as a parable as it relates the story of a 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" (Mama, hear me / I want a horse like that so much / Mama what's this / This is just a horse of wood). In referencing the refrain "Solche Pferde wollt' ich nicht" from Margot Eskens' *Schlager* "Mamatschi" (1956) this song offers another example of intertextuality. Another song from the album *Der siebte Samurai*, "Herzblatt", sums up the singer's upbeat resilience in the face of disappointment with lines like "Mein herzblatt was bist du so traurig / Nnur weil dieser Tag / wieder nicht gehalten hat / was er versprach" (My darling why are you so sad / Just because the times / have once again not delivered what they promised).

For my network of friends and contacts based around the Festival in East Berlin it was clear that Gundermann was a kind of hero. In a time where cultural solidarity was imperative, in the face of media outlets that disregarded the validity of the East German experience, he was someone who poetically embodied their situation. He was their mouthpiece, voicing defiance through witty responses, offering lyrical (if not practical) solutions as one negotiated one's way through everything new. The flip side of the "hero" coin revealed itself in 1995 when Gundermann outed himself as having been a Stasi informer. He did not attempt to exonerate himself, rather leaving it up to his audience to draw their own conclusions. For many it was difficult to imagine such a perennial rebel choosing to cooperate with the MfS. If one is to consider, however, the ardent belief in the original mission of the GDR, which

comes across in the early Brigade Feuerstein productions, it is possibly less difficult to reconcile these two competing images.<sup>23</sup>

Gundermann's last two albums *Frühstück für immer* (1995) and *Engel über dem Revier* (1997) continued to embrace a style of music that helped cement Gundermann's nickname "Springsteen des Ostens" in the media. Lyrically, songs such as "Krieg", "Hier bin ich geboren" or "Und musst du weinen" offered fascinating personal insights into the life and culture of a section of society that could be described as comprising of the East German post-industrial "Nullen" (have-nots). At the same time these insights were couched within a wider philosophical vision of society and the world. While Klaus Peter Schwarz (1999, 42) noted the apparent placidness of some of the post-unification texts such as "Ich mache meinen Frieden" (1993) in contrast to Gundermann's politically militant offerings of the GDR years such as "Schwarze Galeere" (1980), the song "Krieg" showed how his analysis of inequality and injustice was as sharp as ever. If during the Cold War the image of the "enemy" had become blurred amidst realisation of the pointlessness of the conflict— "ich war voller Haß / Und wußte doch nicht mal warum" (I was full of hatred / and didn't even know why)—now, in view of the unambiguous power relations re-emerging in capitalist Germany of the 1990s, the class conflict is clearly defined again.

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<sup>23</sup> In his third interview with Schütt Gundermann goes into detail about his motivations for co-operating with the Stasi. For example, he talks about how he construed any kind of "kleinbürgerlich" (petty bourgeois) behaviour as something "Feindliches" (hostile) (92). He also comments on his inclination "to serve" (94).

Gundermann may have lost his own urge to physically fight, but still warns of impending social conflict:

Nun ist es soweit, wir haben zu zweit  
Wieder klar Schiff gemacht  
Ich hab jetzt endlich ne richtige Arbeit  
Und du jemand, der sie dir macht  
Wenn das Schiff schlingert, machst du  
den Finger  
Und ich mach den Rücken krumm  
Du musst an die Kegel, ich muss an die  
Segel  
Und da weiß ich wieder, warum  
Darum, Bruder, darum wird Krieg  
Den haben wir uns jetzt vor die Füße  
gelegt  
Doch ich singe und bringe nicht um  
Obwohl ich nun wüsste, warum

Now it's come so far the two of us  
Have cleared the decks again  
I now have a proper job  
And you have someone who does it  
for you  
When the ship lurches you lift a  
finger  
And I make my back crooked  
You man the cones and I the sails  
And now I know why, again.  
That's why, brother, that's why  
there'll be war  
We've placed that in our way now.  
But I still sing and don't kill  
Although I now know why I would.

Written in the period when Gundermann was finally laid off as a “Baggerfahrer” amidst the decommissioning of most of the pits in the Lausitz region, both albums are fascinating in terms of how they deal with issues surrounding the deindustrialisation of the East at the hands of neo-liberal politics. As Simon Hain states, in addressing themes such as “Heimatlosigkeit, Utopieverlust und Verantwortungsmüdigkeit” (rootlessness, loss of utopias, responsibility fatigue) their lyrics were forerunners of the widespread international media discussions of the 2000s on the effects of globalisation on the work force (Hain, 2005, 690–91).

Recently I have been involved as a musician and translator in the “Gundermanns Lieder in Europa” project. This took place as part of the activities marking the twentieth anniversary of the singer’s death in June 2018. Organised by Gundermann Seilschaft e.V., the association that promotes his legacy, it took the form of a symposium on 17 June, followed by a week-long workshop in Großräschen and culminating in a concert in the Kulturfabrik in Hoyerswerda the following weekend.



David Robb in February 2020 in front of the Jugendklubhaus "Ossi" in Hoyerswerda, the former practice and performance venue of Gundermann and Brigade Feuerstein  
Courtesy of David Robb

Musicians from around Europe took part, translating selected Gundermann songs into their own languages. They included George Leitenberger singing in French, Pier Angelo (Italian), Johan Meier (Dutch), Jan Řepka (Czech), Aleksander Trąbczyński (Polish), Zhenja Oks (Russian), Pittkunings (Sorbian), Hugo Dietrich and Carmen Orlet (Low German), Jos Koning (Swedish), Claudio Herrera (Spanish)



and myself (English). The musicians all had varying musical styles often reflecting the folk music of the countries they came from. Their adaptations were, however, not confined to folk, other influences seeping in from rock, blues and jazz. Subsequently we recorded the CD *Gundermanns Lieder in Europa* which was released by Gundermann's label Buschfunk in 2019 alongside a booklet documenting the proceedings of the symposium.<sup>24</sup> The CD was voted album of the month by the magazine [www.liederbestenliste.de](http://www.liederbestenliste.de) in October 2019. The whole experience allowed me to rediscover the full depth and range of Gundermann's work, it documented the boundary-crossing, universal qualities of his songs, and set up a strong international network for future collaborations.

The experience also jogged my memory of my last encounter with Gundermann. This had taken place at a *Liedermacher* event organised by Lied und Sozialbewegung e. V. in Berlin Weissensee in spring 1997. I had spoken to him briefly, requesting an interview for my *Liedertheater* research on Brigade Feuerstein. He was polite but reserved, saying that he didn't do interviews very well and asking if I wouldn't mind just sending my questions to him in a letter. Possibly a neat fob-off from a notoriously busy person, I never got around to writing to him. But over twenty years after Gundermann's death, I believe now would be a good time to start properly investigating these old Feuerstein productions.

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<sup>24</sup> Gundermanns Seilschaft e.V, ed., *„Mit einem Lied fang ich erst mal an.“ Gundermanns Lieder in Europa*. Internationales Liedprojekt. Symposium, Workshop & Audio-CD (Berlin: Buschfunk Verlag, 2019).

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