

One upon a time in Berlin

In keeping with its status as a landmark of early 1980s Berlin subculture, the Kreuzberg venue SO 36 is nothing to look at from the outside. Its uninviting façade goes with the territory. With its tightly stacked tenements, courtyards, licensed squats, converted factories and workshops, Kreuzberg is where the former West Berlin ran out of space and into the Wall; the district is home to Germany's largest Turkish community and successive waves of post-1968 generations of artists and musicians, not to mention a sizeable population of anarchists, autonomists, malcontents, squatters, draft dodgers and conscientious objectors ready to take to the streets at the slightest provocation. Defiantly named after Kreuzberg's undesirable Wall-era postcode, SO 36 is spelled out in a desultory neon strip logo, yet the place is still easily overlooked as you walk down Oranienstrasse, a shabbily colourful thoroughfare whose soot-blackened facades are liberally scarred with the graffiti slogans of earlier street campaigns. Yet remarkably for a city left in ruins after the Second World War, a place of entertainment has stood at this same address since the 1860s, when a beer hall opened here to quench the thirst of the growing numbers of workers flooding in to Kreuzberg's 'rent barracks' during Berlin's industrial expansion. In the 1930s, the hall became a cinema; for a few years in the late 1970s, German artist and autodidact Martin Kippenberger took it over and established it as a punk/new wave venue. Thereafter, for a headily brief period in the early 1980s, it served as the hub of Berlin's development into one of Europe's most exhilarating musical destinations, hosting concerts by everyone from The Dead Kennedys to Throbbing Gristle, as well as events like the first Berlin Atonal Festival in the winter of 1982, which brought together pioneering Berlin outfits like Einstürzende Neubauten, Malaria! and Sprung Aus Den Wolken.

SO 36's bare interior was grimly suitable for such a line-up, a concrete bunker capable of withstanding the worst this early incarnation of Neubauten could throw at it during a performance that climaxed with their most destructive character, Andrew Unruh, embedding a jackhammer in the back wall. With their chemically sculpted cheekbones, hollow eyes and seriously distressed hair, the audience were as much living exhibits – or walking corpses – as the acts they were witnessing. Even so, nothing could prepare you for the shock of turning around at the bar to come face to face with a pair of brown and white rats scurrying around the head and shoulders of SO 36 regular, 'Ratten Jenny'.

Events like Atonal acted as a rallying point for a generation seeking an escape route from a leaden West German post-war culture, pocked with uncomfortable silences. This generation was scarcely more enamoured by the 68ers who first started transforming dead end zones like Kreuzberg. Atonal audiences and performers alike marked out their own space by first divining and then dancing along the city's shifting cultural faultlines. But if it was Atonal's admirable ambition to map this newly emerging underground, one entity in particular, Die Tödliche Doris, was conspicuous by its absence. Conceived both as a group and a character pitched somewhere between a bordello madame and an über-housewife-philosopher, The Deadly Doris was

never the kind of girl to do as she was told. She would invariably turn up where she was least expected. Imperious, coquettish and punk to her core, she just wasn't a natural joiner. Yet between 1980–87 – the seven years she allocated to her earthly mission – Die Tödliche Doris played Berlin like a dada board game, popping up all over the city in the unlikeliest places in a baffling range of guises, clambering up ladders and sliding down snakes, while shedding one skin after another – here a butterfly, there a blindworm, rarely wearing the same outfit twice. Unlike her immediate contemporaries Einstürzende Neubauten, who quickly branded themselves with a singularly powerful image, Die Tödliche Doris advocated constant change. However, she did create her own logo by flipping over the dotted 'S' sign standing for Sparkasse in front of German banks. Upside down, it looked like a question mark – an apt sign for Die Tödliche Doris to trade under.

“One of the main conventions of music is that you have to create one image,” says Wolfgang Müller, who co-founded Die Tödliche Doris with fellow art student Nikolaus Utermöhlen, “and that image is the basis of success, but this time after punk was very open to do something else. That is, an image can consist of hundreds of different aspects, so in fact Die Tödliche Doris is not a non-image. It is a complete image. But the fixed thing – that I am that and that and that – is only interesting if you put a question mark after it. Then you can make new things always.”

During her lifetime, Die Tödliche Doris wasn't the best known of new Berlin groups, but the restless self-questioning of the line-up that stabilised around Müller, Utermöhlen (who sadly died from AIDS-related causes in 1996) and their third drummer Käthe Kruse made her the most emblematic of a city geologically built on sand and struggling to find an identity after its post-war division into East and West zones. Right from the off, she remained indifferent to accusations or praise as artists making music or untrained musicians making art. On the contrary, she embraced the amateurism of the Geniale Dilletanten (Ingenious Dilletantes [sic], about whom more later) as her one true path long after her contemporaries had rationalised their approaches in order to carve careers for themselves. Die Tödliche Doris was only interested in evolving the skills sufficient to realising a given project, be it song, Super-8 film, live happenings, sculpture or visual arts. Music, however, was always her main field of operation, and Müller and Utermöhlen were clear about what they did and didn't want. “It was always important that we have a woman in our band,” says Müller. “We saw this Neubauten thing as a bit negative to have only five men, a bit macho...”

“Die Tödliche Doris is very close to Tödliche Dosis, German for fatal dose, overdose,” he expands. “That means dead. It means nothing. So we have to work with this ambivalence between Doris and Dosis in order to discover Die Tödliche Doris's personality. The sense of humour in the name is also nice. I like that in English Doris doesn't sound like an artist but a totally normal housewife.”

Before 1980, West Berlin's musical character was defined from the outside, by visitors like David Bowie, Iggy Pop and other seekers of Cabaret notions of divine decadence. Such myths, combined with its Cold War status, made Berlin a popular pitstop for British and American punk-and-after groups, yet the city was slower than the rest of West Germany to respond to punk's DIY manifestos, unless you count the thankfully shortlived 'Wall City rock' schtick perpetrated by chancers like PVC. "Rock music was always for young people to identify with and to get some ideas of the world," ponders Müller, "and at the end of the 70s people didn't believe anymore in the truth of rock music... I think this was a quite open period. Maybe this was the ground for what came. It was an uncertain time."

After the lushly romanticised alienation of Bowie's "Heroes", the song that captured the Wall city myth of dancing at the edge of the abyss was "Kebab-Träume" ("Kebab Dreams"), first performed as "Militurk" by the legendary Düsseldorf punk group Mittagspause but best realised in the tremendous 1980 single version by Deutsch-Amerikanische-Freundschaft (DAF). Gleefully parodying gutter press-fanned fears of Turkish guest workers and anti-communist paranoia, the song gifted Berlin's graffiti writers with two favourite wall slogans: "Germany, Germany, it's all over" and "We're the Turks of tomorrow". The first inverted the all-conquering German national anthem, the second the Nazi torch song popularised by Cabaret, called "Tomorrow Belongs To Me".

When, in November 1980, DAF headlined a German punk festival at Berlin Free University, only Mania D, the all-woman trio featuring shortlived Einstürzende Neubauten members Gudrun Gut and Beate Bartel, were sufficiently developed to provide a convincing local presence. By the end of the following year, the pole positions had completely reversed. DAF's astonishing entry into the mainstream as a pre-Techno duo making electronic sex music had caused the West German punk scene to peak and backslide into the record industry-led Neue Deutsche Welle (New German Wave) phenomenon. In September 1981, meanwhile, a group of artists with entirely other ambitions went public at Die Grosse Untergangsshow: Festival Geniale Dilletanten (The Great Downfall Show: Festival Of Ingenious Dilletantes) held in a circus tent called Tempodrom near Potsdamer Platz, once Berlin's busiest intersection, but by this time a desolate patch of wasteland. Mostly the brainchild of Blixa Bargeld, the event presented a programme including Einstürzende Neubauten, Sprung Aus Den Wolken, Gudrun Gut and Die Tödliche Doris, among others, as an end-times revue formally hosted by actor Wieland Speck to a sold out crowd of 1200 people.

A substantial number of the festival's Dilletanten went on to play significant roles in the development of the city's first truly idiosyncratic counterculture. Einstürzende Neubauten are probably the best known German artists since Can and Kraftwerk; Westbam and Mancunian exile Mark Reeder (of Nekropolis and Die Unbekannten) helped establish Techno as the soundtrack of post-1990 Berlin; Gudrun Gut has been the driving force behind Mania D, Malaria!, Matador and Ocean Club; she also founded the successful Berlin label Monika; and so on. But the wildly erratic if fascinating CD, DVD and LP

set released late last year by Vinyl On Demand to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the event bears out Bargeld's long-held assertion that the music on the night mostly wasn't very good. Indeed, his own and Neubauten's contributions, plus those of Die Tödliche Doris, stand up well for the way they embody the festival's manifesto of privileging inspired, insane amateurism above the sterile creativity of the professional culture industry. This immensely playful manifesto was articulated best in *Die Geniale Dilletanten*, edited and co-written by Müller and published in 1982 by the small Berlin independent, Merve Verlag. That spirit also comes alive in the DVD document of Die Tödliche Doris's contribution, in which Müller sabotages any hope of musicianly virtuosity by playing his violin with feather fingernail extensions, while Utermöhlen attacks his 'gender' guitar (strung with two bass and two electric guitar strings) with a drumstick and scraping device. Like their then drummer Dagmar Dimitroff, the pair are flamboyantly feathered, furred and painted, to the annoyance of some sectors of the crowd, including one Matthias Motte, later aka Dr Motte, founder of Berlin's Love Parade. Back in 1981, as a member of DPA (Deutsch-Polnische-Aggression), however, he took Die Tödliche Doris's exuberance as an opportunity to exercise his capacity for hatred by reportedly barraging Müller with beer bottles.

"One week later I met him accidentally at a bar called Risiko," recalls Müller, laughing. "I didn't know him and he didn't know me because my face had been painted at that show. He told me that last week he was throwing so many bottles at the singer of Die Tödliche Doris that he couldn't continue to play his violin, and I said, Oh, that was you!" A few months later, Müller would make Motte pay in a very Die Tödliche Doris way of making the punishment fit the crime.

Ascending ladders and slithering down snakes... Die Tödliche Doris's progress differed radically from the overt extremism that was coming to define the sound of Berlin. They declined an invitation to join Einstürzende Neubauten, Sprung Aus Den Wolken and MDK on a tour of West Germany under the banner *Die Berliner Krankheit* (The Berlin Sickness), only to discover that Zickzack (the Hamburg independent label that released Doris's first 12", *Seven Deadly Accidents Around The Home*, and album, " ", as well as the early Neubauten records, among hundreds of others) had already advertised them as appearing on the bill at SO 36 in November 1981. Further, the West German TV programme *Rockpalast* intended to film it for a Berlin special.

"We thought if it's just the name they want, we can put three unknown people onstage," recalls Müller. "So we chose three people who didn't know our music, including Dr Motte, who had bottled us at Tempodrom, gave them three texts and our private flat to rehearse in, and we said, You can now compose any music you want to these texts. And then we go backstage with them. When we were announced, we went onstage with these three people and then jumped down into the audience giving out cards explaining we have dissolved Die Tödliche Doris for one hour at SO 36 and in our place is *Die Tödliche Doris In An Alien Body*. I was standing in the audience watching us

and heard the woman standing next to me saying, 'Oh ja, they always make this kind of crazy noisy music, this is typical!' We don't work with this personality thing like Sprung Aus Den Wolken's Kiddy Citny or Blixa or Malaria!. We just work with the opposite, no fixed image... So we are free to wear and look like what we want."

Die Tödliche Doris's unstable identity concept was deemed to be too difficult for Rockpalast's audience. "They thought we were being so bitchy and didn't want to be on television," laughs Müller. Believing the group was playing hard to get, the TV producers weren't about to give up so easily. Indeed, the more 'difficult' Die Tödliche Doris behaved, the greater the concessions Rockpalast allowed her. The programme suggested filming die Tödliche Doris by the Wall. After all, it was for a Berlin special. "I said, OK we stand in front of the Wall," laughs Müller, "but we choose the place." He chose a site at the end of Adalbert Strasse where the Wall was hidden behind a heap of sand excavated from the street. Point the camera left and you have East Berlin and on the right West Berlin, but without the Wall in view, the two sectors were symbolically reunited. On Rockpalast, Die Tödliche Doris presented Naturkatastrophen, a performance piece that marked a radical shift away from the tremendous noise punk and 'avon garde' punning of their early cassette and record releases. In place of songs like "Der Tod Ist Ein Skandal" ("Death Is A Scandal"), with its oblique John Cage references ("The machine functions/We are all hostages") and "Schuldstruktur" ("Guilt Structure"), they performed a bizarre ballet enacting the natural catastrophes described in a deadpan newscaster tone by Müller, rattling cups, banging their knees together and paddling in puddles. In a second section, Kruse is seen spitting fire at the microphone, setting it alight, while Utermöhlen gingerly fingers an accordion, the keys of which are studded with drawing pins. After a few minutes aflame, the microphone cuts out but the broadcast continues for some seconds before finally fading into bright light.

"We really had to fight hard with the television station to get more seconds of silence," recalls Müller, "because they were totally afraid that people would be calling to say something has gone wrong with the microphone. One theme that always interested us was information. It was a main point also for Throbbing Gristle. What was shocking or a real disaster for the information society was when the information was not working. So the idea was that you show the sound suddenly disappearing through Käthe spitting fire onto the microphone. What she is doing and saying is, she is accelerating the collapse of the information system."

The burnt microphones from various Naturkatastrophen performances were gathered and displayed as Beuys-like relics of the disaster at a small exhibition in gelbe MUSIK, an art record shop and gallery some distance from Kreuzberg in Schaperstrasse, which published a catalogue and one-sided single of the piece. In collaboration with the Düsseldorf independent label Pure Freude, gelbe MUSIK helped Die Tödliche Doris realise the production of Chöre Und Soli, a set of eight 2" plastic records only playable on an apparatus normally found embedded in the chests of talking dolls. The set marked another shift in the focus of her interrogation of the information society

– this time from the music itself to the medium packaging and disseminating it. The contents had to be composed with the apparatus's poor sound reproduction in mind. To overcome these shortcomings, Die Tödliche Doris conceived an a cappella song cycle in 16 20-second parts, performed by a line-up embellished by occasional collaborator Tabea Blumenschein, a Berlin underground movie star, model and designer.

Die Tödliche Doris continued reconfiguring the recording format with her next two releases, *Unser Debut* (1984) and *Sechs* (1986). Both albums had synchronised track lengths, so they could be played simultaneously to create an invisible third album. The original plan was to release *Unser Debut* through the Western independent Atatak (Düsseldorf home of *Der Plan*) and *Sechs* on the East German Amiga label. Sadly the latter turned the group down, saying, "We have already planned releases for the next five years'," smiles Müller. "A nice result of this correspondence was that two years before the Wall came down we were featured in an East German encyclopedia of popular music, which wrote that we were an anti-capitalist band from West Berlin, but they misspelled the name as Die Tödliche Dosis, Deadly Dose. They didn't see our subversive element, that we were not only against the capitalist system but also socialism the way it used to be practised in the GDR."

For the West, *Unser Debut* was conceived as U-musik – Unterhaltungs-musik (entertainment music) – while its Eastern companion *Sechs* was E-musik (a German designation for Ernste-musik, serious music). *Unser Debut* was more straightforwardly song-orientated, performed on conventional instruments, while *Sechs* was more abstract, abrasive, atonal even. The Invisible 5th LP that materialises when they're played simultaneously serves as another East-West reunification ritual – anticipating the fall of the Wall by three years – as well as the symbolic integration of 'high' and 'low' culture. Die Tödliche Doris's inspired amateurism always refused to acknowledge such high-low distinctions. Their songs have drawn from a broader definition of popular culture. Her earlier work patched punk immediacy with elements derived from campaigning music, government information and industrial jeopardy films. Her later songs embraced street corner and courtyard balladry, reproducible on junkshop keyboards, accordions, marching drums and clarinets. By the time of the final record released during her lifetime, a 'live' album called *Liveplaybacks* (Die Tödliche Doris Records 1986), almost all the music had been transferred to tape, leaving her free to concentrate on performance. Her new strategy involved recording the first playback concert and playing that one back at the next town, recording it, and so on. By the time she reached the final show of the tour, the playback tape's source music is buried beneath the dense, fuggy atmosphere of 14 overlaid performances. *Liveplaybacks* charts the tape's sound degradation as the tour progressed.

An *Einstürzende Neubauten* title stated, "Draussen Ist Feindlich", meaning outside is hostile. They might well have been referring to the ugly reception given to Berliners whenever they left the sanctuary of the Wall city. German punk centres like Hamburg habitually bottled Berlin artists, dismissing them as arty and pretentious. But escaping the claustrophobic atmosphere of living in

Berlin, where you can only perform so often to the same captive audience, was essential. In her time, Die Tödliche Doris staged events in Paris, Warsaw, Budapest and across Germany. For one especially grand day out, she hedged her bets by taking her audience with her, gathering 20 fans for a bus and ferry trip to Helgoland, a tiny rock island rising out of the North Sea to plant Die Tödliche Doris's flag on a site charged with historical significance for Germans: here's where the poet Hoffmann Von Fallersleben wrote the text for the German national anthem. More usually, Die Tödliche Doris was tough enough to brazen it out with the meanest audiences. Nor was she above a little bear baiting. For her 1985 one-minute appearance at the Moers Jazz Festival, in a strand curated by Heiner Goebbels, she set out to include all the elements free jazz abhorred. "We found a lot of things," recalls Müller. "In one minute we cannot show everything but we can bring some of them: fog machine, peep show – sex is absolutely taboo in free jazz. Playback, also taboo... Of the 50 bands taking part, we were the only successful one who people booed."

For Die Tödliche Doris, mobility was not just about crossing time and space, it was also a case of free movement between media. Next to music, she was a prolific Super-8 film maker. Most of her films were made around West Berlin, showing areas such as Gleisdreieck, a little piece of East-controlled scrubland on the Western side of the Wall, where Die Tödliche Doris went searching for the fictional Hailberry hen in her 24 minute masterpiece, *Das Graupelbeerhuhn*. "The former central Berlin station [destroyed in the war] stood on the area where this film was made," explains Müller. "Between the rusty, destroyed rails and platforms, trees and rare plants have grown, and scientists have discovered species of rare or even unknown insects, brought in unintentionally with cargo of the trains from the East." An early section is given over to a bleak wintry train run along the corridor through the GDR connecting West Berlin to West Germany, over a jaunty all-purpose piece of Die Tödliche Doris 'furniture music', deploying crude keyboard preset rhythm and cheesy melody offset by some pensive clarinet. The same piece has elsewhere been used to raise votes for Die Tödliche Doris's attempt to get elected to the Berlin senate, and later as a backdrop for the bilingual philosophical treatise *Die Über-Doris* (The Super-Doris).

Die Tödliche Doris's Super-8 films are remarkably evocative of a rapidly disappearing era. One documents the ruminations of a 'straight' girl rebirthed through punk, filmed in a typical Berlin back courtyard (*Sabine: Aus Meinem Tagebuch/From My Diary*); in *John Heys Sings*, a visiting American friend looking like an animated figure from an Otto Dix painting campily sings a theatre song in his pension, accompanied at the piano by his landlord, in a style that evokes Isherwood, Cabaret and Weimar; in the grotesquely comic, yet moving *Das Leben Des Sid Vicious* (The Life Of Sid Vicious), the three year old son of drummer Dagmar Dimitroff plays Sid, running down the street in his swastika T-shirt.

As an entity, Die Tödliche Doris had given herself a seven year plan, which she stuck to by dissolving herself into a bottle of Die Tödliche Doris "Weisser Burgunder Aus Schweigen" wine in 1987. But this was by no means her final transformation. Indeed, she has led a full and active afterlife since setting herself up in an atelier at the back of the Kumpelnest 3000, a former bordello turned into a bar with original fixtures and fittings intact by Mark Ernestus, later of Basic Channel and Rhythm & Sound. For a while, Müller, Kruse and Utermöhlen continued to operate individually as pupils from "the school of Die Tödliche Doris". Die Tödliche Doris herself rematerialised for a 1989 performance in East Berlin, a play in Tokyo, and a vaguely related Japanese comic book character, Die Tödliche Dolis. But she underwent her most radical metamorphosis at Berlin's Volksbühne in 1998, when her 1982 debut album " " was transformed from sound into movement and silence as a signed performance for deaf listeners. The performance was the latest in a long line of Doris and Müller projects with and for the deaf community.

"The transformation of the record into a new medium has been a giant leap for me," remarks Müller in an interview included on the DVD document of the performance, *Gehörlose Musik (Soundless Music)*, released this month. "You put on a record, sounds fill the room, and two sign-language interpreters, Andrea Schulz and Dina Tabbert, transform both the music and the lyrics into signs. This leap is like the one from sheet music to the actual sound." The event returns Die Tödliche Doris to the predominant theme of her life's work: the information society and how to deal with its blizzard of signals. "We have breached these topics through sounds and the way the sounds develop," he continues. "In this respect, it was a logical step to develop this idea further, to turn sounds into something else... When two interpreters turn the music of Die Tödliche Doris into signs, into bodily movement in a given space, this doesn't mean that the music disappears. Even though you can't hear it, it is still there. Die Tödliche Doris was never about clear-cut definitions or tying ourselves down. While we have never been noncommittal, we have committed ourselves entirely to one thing or another. The interpretation, or definition, happens in the listeners' heads anyway."

Gehörlose Musik is out this month on Edition Kröthenhayn. A selection of Die Tödliche Doris books are available from www.martin-schmitz-verlag.de. Some Doris records were reissued in 2005 by Vinyl On Demand. A compilation, *Kinderringellreihen Für Wahren Toren Des Grals*, is out on Psychedelic Pig. Die Tödliche Doris Website: www.die-toedliche-doris.de. Thanks to Ursula Block and Martin Schmitz

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