

Horst Fascher and Germany's Lifeline to International Culture

David Caldwell

Horst Fascher is a 70-year old resident of Hamburg known principally for his work at the Star Club, the night club venue near St. Pauli where the Beatles first became an international hit in April, 1962. His memoir *Let the Good Times Roll!* was published in 2006 and has received considerable attention. The *New York Times* noted it as an example of the ongoing intergenerational appeal of the Beatles and a contribution to understanding the background of a popular musical phenomenon (Bernstein, A4). Oliver Flesch, in his afterword to Fascher's memoir, reminds us, however, that the central value of the book lies in its study of Fascher himself and what his life story has to offer a contemporary public, regardless of their musical leanings (Flesch, 274).¹

My interest in Fascher is less concerned with the undeniable intergenerational aspect of his look back at the Beatles than with the cross-cultural interaction between Fascher and the Beatles, between Germany and the West, and between Germans and international pop culture, including the Beatles and other singers such as Elvis Presley. The assumption that popular interest in Fascher's memoir indicates some transcendent taste among generations of rock and roll devotees, a taste that manifests itself not just in toe-tapping but also in thirst for background information, history, and a culture of the genre, belies Adorno's claim in *Culture Industry* that the concept of taste is itself outmoded. In his chapter entitled "The Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening," Adorno maintains that changes in art and the reception of art are adjustments to the criteria that dictate judgments (Adorno, 29). In this sense Fascher's life story can

be looked at as more than an account of his role in the ultimate success of the Beatles. It is an account of the cultural, historical, and societal circumstances that drew Fascher and his compatriots, as children of wartime and postwar Germany, to Anglo-American pop music.

While Fascher liberally sprinkles Beatles lyrics throughout his memoir, it is clear that his interest in the Fab Four is not just as a fan of the Beatles, rather as a part of the industry that allows musical groups to flourish as capitalist enterprises. His tender affection for the singers and their music is balanced by an aggressive entrepreneurial drive. Fascher's principal appeal to Brian Epstein, when he first met the Beatles' manager in London, was not on the basis of proven devotion to an emerging new musical trend. Rather it was a threat of sheer brutality. Fascher clearly understands that popular music is part of the culture industry, and that the culture industry entails ruthless business practices. He writes that when Epstein told him he intended to place the Beatles in a rival Hamburg club rather than in the Star Club, Fascher assured Epstein that if that happened the other establishment would be shut down by an undisclosed method (Fascher, 21). While there is no indication that Epstein necessarily felt threatened by Fascher, he was at least impressed by him. The clout that Fascher held with the Beatles' business manager owed itself to his fraternally good relations with the Beatles themselves. He had befriended them in Hamburg when they had appeared there in individual club-by-club bookings. His interest in rock and roll drew him initially to their performances, but ultimately his knowledge of the rough St. Pauli district and his ability to meet the band members' non-artistic needs was what cemented their friendship and the possibility of working together contractually in the Star Club.

Fascher is fascinating to German readers not merely because he had the passionate ambition to bring world class stars to the Elbe (17). More broadly he represents a set of Adorno's circumstances for making decisions about culture. Fascher's life resembles the harrowing course of Germany's history since the rise of the Nazis, including its commingled elements of artistic aspiration and desperate excesses. A close examination of the memoir reveals not just a look at what Adorno called "star power" rather also a means of understanding larger political and economic transitions in terms of individual cultural identification and consumption.

The vacuum left by the suppression of innovative art during the Third Reich is ironically illustrated in Hamburg by the Star Club itself, which acquired its name because the space in which it was located had earlier been a cinema called Stern Kino. During his childhood the Stern Kino was known to Fascher as the venue for wild West movies (17). American entertainment films had already replaced German Ufa productions in the cultural life of the city as postwar Germany, struggling to recover from its ultra-national experiences, reached out to the international mainstream. The Star Club was converted from a venue depicting frontier experiences in America to a frontier in its own right—the entry point into Germany for rock and roll bands from Germany's occupiers.

Fascher's birth to a working class family in Hamburg, his father absent on long working sea voyages, represents inauspicious beginnings closely determined by national circumstances. Reminiscent of Berlin's Treptow Memorial to Soviet war dead, in which a Soviet soldier cradles a German child in his arms, a photographed pose by Fascher's mother holding her two-year old son is included in the memoir (29). It illustrates the experiences of a generation that lost parents to war and subsequently became what

filmmaker R. W. Fassbinder, writers Günter Grass and Heinrich Böll, and sociologist Alexander Mitscherlich have in various ways depicted as a fatherless German society, born of a generation that sought alternative paternal dependencies.

In 1940 the Fascher family evacuated to the farm of relatives in East Prussia to avoid the urban air raids over Hamburg. As the war progressed, the family, now minus the father because of his conscription into the Wehrmacht, fled westward on foot in advance of the Soviet Army. After much privation Horst, his mother, siblings, and a cousin returned to Hamburg, where they found their apartment occupied by another family who resolutely refused to move out. The Faschers, the father now in captivity in Siberia, spent the remainder of the war accommodating a disagreeable squatter family named Sinnhard. This experience overlapped the occupation of the northwest quadrant of the country by British forces as Germany was divided administratively among the four powers. Abuses and indignities at the hands of Herr Sinnhard, who resented having children in the apartment, even though he did not own the property, are an interesting parallel in Fascher's memoir to the presence in Hamburg of British occupation forces, a presence which he found generally much more tolerable than the German family squatting in his home. The foreignness deplored by the national propaganda of his childhood had now become a window to the world and a lifeline to an existence beyond his limited experience of deprivation and loss. British radio broadcasts intended for its troops in Germany brought regular programs of American popular music, including swing, jazz, and blues music that had been denounced by the Nazis, and eventually also rock and roll.

The slow road back to economic stability as Germany rebuilt and sought to normalize relations with the West is documented personally by Horst Fascher's rocky rise to prominence. As a young teenager he learned to box at a British military boxing club. Fascher quickly realized a talent for the sport, part of which, he writes, was due to his need to channel anger and aggression. Eventually he became featherweight champion in the Hamburg boxing circuit at the same time he was training at the *Handelskammer* to become a ship's carpenter.

In the late 1950s foreign popular music acts began making appearances at Hamburg's Ernst Merck Halle, including such figures as Bo Diddley, Little Richard, Ella Fitzgerald, Lionel Hampton, and Ray Charles. Hamburg's native cultural attractions were and still are on the seamier side, and it was often the case that foreign visitors frequented the bars, night clubs, and bordellos of the Reeperbahn, alongside sailors, working class and middle class Germans. Fascher's connections with the area and the English he managed to learn from listening to radio broadcasts and spending time at British military facilities, brought him into contact both with the popular music of the U.S. and Britain as well as with the personal tastes and needs that visitors had for entertainment and pleasure.

Fascher's earth-moving experience with a St. Pauli prostitute at age fourteen is graphically described in his biography and appears to have formed as important a part of his credentials for becoming a host to foreign musicians, as was his love of rock and roll music. He associates the music from the outset with a sexual experience, noting that the term rock-n-roll was originally a sexual allusion, a black slang expression for coitus (56).

Raymond M. Weinstein, in his recent article about postwar Germany as reflected in Elvis Presley's experiences as a G.I. there, notes that the prevalence of popular western

music in Germany was accompanied by the arrival of black American troops, many of whom engaged in sexual relations with German women (Weinstein, 137). Opposition to rock and roll music on moral grounds became distinctly identified with the older generation and bore uncomfortable but unmistakable similarities to the Nazi ban on swing music and dance as well as to Third Reich racial politics. Thus, embracing the risqué music of foreigners became a way for Fascher's generation to sever ties with the political specter of the Third Reich and also declare a personal and sexual liberation from the generation of their parents.

Fascher's accounts of the Beatles' sexual escapades in Germany underscore the role of sexuality in the postwar internationalization of German pop culture. One of the first impressions he made with the Beatles, even before Fascher was engaged at the Star Club by owner Manfred Weissleder, himself a producer of pornographic films, was to arrange for "*die Jungs*," as he calls them, to meet local girls. Later, when the Beatles were under contract at the Star Club, it fell to Fascher to keep them away from underaged girls and to avoid negative publicity.

Fascher's role in supervising the Beatles came to resemble the oversight attempted by the occupying military forces as they simultaneously fostered supportive relationships with the German civilian population while discouraging fraternization. The sexually charged aura of the Beatles creeps into Fascher's memoir in various ways, including an anecdote about their detention by Hamburg police for disorderly conduct. When the singers asked the police to contact Fascher and inform him of their arrest, the police officer who contacted Fascher referred to the group as "*die Piedels*," having

misunderstood and mispronounced the word Beatles. Fascher notes that in the dialect of St. Pauli, *Piedel* is the word used for penis (105).

Fascher acknowledges a penchant for jealous and temperamental outbursts that goes back to his altercations with the unwelcome sharer of his flat, Herr Sinnhard. He brawled in school as a way of exacting revenge for indignities perpetrated by classmates and eventually suffered a personal low point in his life when he assaulted a sailor on the street after the man made overtures to the woman he was dating. The man fell, hitting his head on a paving stone and later died. Fascher was incarcerated for manslaughter, and the music world and the Beatles' career moved ahead without him. In a particularly poignant account from his nine-month imprisonment, Fascher recounts that the prison is located in the vicinity of the Ernst Merck Halle, where the Beatles performed before leaving the city. Fascher was even able to hear occasional strains of amplified music through the window of his cell. John Lennon dedicated their performance of "Roll Over Beethoven" at that concert to Horst Fascher (14).

Fascher's rise back to prominence in musical promotion after his release from prison parallels postwar Germany's recovery after its fall during World War II. Not only did Fascher and many Germans of his generation find a lifeline in the form of international popular culture, Fascher credits himself also with making Germany a launching place for musicians who rose to world fame. His relationship to pop culture was never one of pure admiration, rather as a scrappy survivor of hard times, Fascher was fully conscious of culture as an industry and of the power of that industry to manipulate the public for economic gain. His colleague Oliver Flesch admits a fondness for stories about likeable underdogs ("*Geschichten über sympathische Verlierer*" 274), a role that

Fascher cultivates with his life story. The drama of his personal relationship with the singers continued long after the Beatles became world famous. In 1994 Fascher's second wife gave birth to a baby girl with a congenital heart defect from which she eventually died. The only hope for survival lay with an expensive operation by a heart specialist in Houston, the bill for which, some \$250,000, was paid by Paul McCartney. Fascher ties this generosity to the meager circumstances in which both he and the relatively unknown visitors from Liverpool shared in the early 1960s, remarking that the quarter million dollar medical bill made good on the all the *Erbensuppe* cooked by Fascher's mother for the band, as well as her standing offer to wash their laundry and mend their clothes while they were performing at the Star Club. Fascher's interaction with the performers he promoted is consistently depicted as a dialectical balance of receiving and giving aid in ways that assure mutual advantage. As such his story is emblematic of postwar and Cold War relations between Germany and the West.

Let the Good Times Roll! is more than a survival and recovery story and takes his German readership a step beyond yet another account of destitution in Germany in the postwar years. In the late 1960s his musical connections at the Star Club enabled Fascher to promote other singers and musicians, including a number of prominent African-American performers. He allowed himself to be photographed in close embrace with Little Richard in the singer's backstage dressing room (143), not merely in obeisance to star power, rather also in a conscious attempt to position a German musical promoter at the forefront not just of intercultural, rather also of interracial engagement.

American pop culture routinely evaded the uncomfortable questions of segregation and racism simply by not begrudging the financial success of a number of

black performers in the 1960s while never addressing underlying societal ills. As Erika Doss points out in her study of Elvis Presley, the success of white rock and roll performers as cutting edge artists often owed itself to African-American sources. The phrase “rhythm and ooze,” which Presley used in his 1960 film *G. I. Blues*, illustrates a redefinition of male sensuality through physical movement and musical style (Doss, 135). At the same time, as Raymond M. Weinstein’s analysis of *G.I. Blues* reveals, the film hypocritically whitewashes the conduct of G.I.s in Germany in the 1950s, particularly with regard to their sexual fraternization with German women, and it meticulously avoids any depiction of black service personnel in Germany (Weinstein, 128-29). Presley’s image and popular appeal had distinct sexual overtones and a heritage of African influence, yet in *G. I. Blues* he exists in an imagined world of chaste whiteness.

Fascher’s memoir, in contrast to popular cultural representations by Hollywood, openly confronts the sexual excesses and sexual economy of postwar Germany. While Fascher is a lifelong admirer of Presley’s music and keeps a poster picture of “the King” on his office wall, the two men never met, and their career paths are instructively different. Presley’s decision to eschew the Special Services unit of the Army and serve his military time in an artillery unit rather than entertaining, was a choice that was not determined by necessity and thus represents a luxury. His presence abroad was warmly embraced by young Germans, who were permitted one hour a week to seek his autograph near his base at Bad Nauheim. Presley’s noble sacrifice in uniform was suitably parlayed into profitable notoriety that benefited his post-military singing career, but none of the publicity, including the film *G.I. Blues*, includes any references to his own documented fraternization with German women. Germans familiar with the occupation forces prior to

1990 find an appreciative openness in Fascher's airing of the Beatles' dirty laundry, including illicit romps with underaged females and in John Lennon's case, encounters with transvestites (112). *Let the Good Times Roll!* departs markedly from those Hollywood representations of foreign celebrities on German soil that seek to maintain the myth of innocents abroad.

During the 1960s many black performers participated actively in the civil rights movement, and Germans as well as Americans became familiar with the demand for Black Power. Fascher's promotional career included service in Vietnam, where he helped sponsor entertainment for U.S. troops, including a number of black performers, and where he befriended a number of G.I. s, especially black servicemen. His life story represents for Germans an example of how the country had not only managed to survive World War II and recover from it, but also in questions of cultural integrity, to surpass the ideals purportedly held by their Anglo-British occupiers regarding human rights and civil liberties. In ways similar to the embrace by playwright Heinar Kipphardt of the persecution by US authorities of nuclear scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer,² Fascher's memoir demonstrates that the Third Reich in which he spent his childhood was far from the only instance of authoritarianism and injustice, and that indeed these tendencies can be found also among the defeaters of Nazism.

Fascher's book ends with an account of his son David, a budding boxer following in his father's footsteps, photographed together with recently deceased Max Schmeling, Germany's champion boxer of the 1920s and 1930s (259). In this way the book comes full circle, from an emphasis on the new intercultural Germany to a coda that remains grounded in the German past. *Let the Good Times Roll!* reminds us of the powerful

presence of history in contemporary German cultural identity, the inextricable links between the milestones of German history and the popular culture of its foreign occupiers, and the ability of Germans to sing foreign songs according to their own tune.

Though the Beatles' stint in Hamburg is a matter of musical nostalgia, its cultural implications are replicated in subsequent chapters of German history. Those of us at Potsdamer Platz on July 21, 1990, when Roger Waters and Pink Floyd performed *The Wall* for the first time in ten years—precisely in Berlin—can understand how Germans regard the popular culture of foreigners as a proven method for breaking down barriers and as a lifeline to the future.

Notes

¹ Throughout the essay, paraphrasing and translation into English from the original German originate with the author.

² Heinar Kipphardt, *In der Sache J. Robert Oppenheimer* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1964).

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