

LAIBACH AND THINK OF ENGLAND, GERMANY, AND SLOVENIA...

They play electronic, teutonic versions of Queen and the Fabs. They cover everything from national anthems to Kraftwerk. And it's all in the name of art and making us think. *Laibach* are probed by Ian Shirley



On 19 October 2012 Laibach actually performed a selection of their early industrial material below ground in the mining museum of their native Slovenia.

This extraordinary event set the stone on a year that not only saw Mute release a career retrospective entitled *Reproduction Prohibited* but also found Laibach crafting the soundtrack to the feature film *Iron Sky*. Director Timo Vuorensola stated that Laibach partly inspired the film: "At least that is what he told us," the band told me, in an email interview that they all claim credit for. "That's also why he wanted Laibach to do the soundtrack." For anyone who has yet to see *Iron Sky*, it is a deliciously dark comedy about a hidden Nazi base on the moon in a post-Obama world, where the US President is a frightening replica of Sarah Palin.

Laibach, who, since they formed in 1980, have found inspiration in totalitarian imagery, uniforms and presentation, were a fitting part-inspiration for this highly enjoyable film. As for *Iron Sky's* soundtrack, the music reflects the widescreen sound that Laibach muster from the faux-Beverly Sisters harmony of *Take Me To Heaven*, through classical sensitivity, to the pulsing orchestral electronica of B-Machina. "Originally we wanted to do much more experimental sound and music, but it didn't fit," Laibach state: "There are Wagnerian signifiers all over the movie, dominated by the Hollywoodian film narration, which dictated a very specific language we simply had to follow. As a main source of inspiration we therefore decided on Wagner."

Coalmines, soundtrack work and even the *We Come In Peace* tour to promote *Iron Sky* aside, the Laibach collective have come a

long way from the days when they were outlawed in the former republic of Yugoslavia, although today they play down their early struggle. "In reality the communist system in Yugoslavia was falling apart with chaos, and this allowed us to practice greater freedom of expression than the one that existed in a 'free world'. Being forbidden was, in a way, a very comfortable position, giving us more social, cultural and political power. We carried the curse of the ban with great pleasure."

This curse extended to banned concerts and official disquiet in a left-wing country over an image that flaunted right-wing military uniforms, black cross armbands and the use of totalitarian symbolism. Also, in fermenting a manifesto, the band, like The Residents before them, have erected a hydra around their musical core that expressed a collective mind and zeitgeist through music, art and cultural expression, rather than a cult of personality and guitar solos.

Although Laibach formed in 1980 and made recordings, it was not until 1985 that they released their first album on the Slovenian Ropot label, and as the name Laibach was banned, the only reference on the LP cover was the black cross associated with the band and their militaristic armbands. Two more albums followed on a German label, *Rekapitulacija*, and *New Konservativ (Live)* (both 1985), and then in the UK on Cherry Red – *Nova Atropola* (also '85). Crucially the band had come to London in 1984 and had begun touring Europe.

Signing to Mute records in '86 was key, as it gave some financial stability and allowed the band to extend their blast radius. Their first Mute LP *Opus Dei* ('87) showed that Laibach were not only interested in the thud of the factory floor but more diverse strands


of music. "We were looking for a perfect mixture of expression, a 'Gesamtkunstwerk' that would not limit us only to a 'rock' or 'music' group. That is why we let ourselves be inspired by the historical political and artistic movements, by film, architecture and art, by everything we could digest. But on the other hand we were big fans of popular culture in all its diversity and especially in its sonic incarnations. So we decided to combine everything into an explosive, all-inclusive mixture, dressed in music."

In fact, they had taken deep gulps of bands as diverse as Joy Division, Frank Zappa, folk music, contemporary classical, film music and even pop hits, and this informed *Opus Dei*, which contained cover versions of anthems like *Live Is Life* and *Queen's One Vision* – sung in German/English – which the band call "the best to bring out the hidden reverse of pop music". This subjugation of the cover version to the Laibach vision was a key factor in breaking down barriers and winning wider acceptance. "We treat and understand cover versions as unique interpretations of the historical material. Very much like they do it in classical music, when they interpret Bach, Wagner, Cage or Stockhausen, or even more as in the theatre productions, when they deal with interpretations of Sophocles, Shakespeare or Brecht."

Thus The Rolling Stones' *Sympathy For The Devil* was fair game, as was The Beatles *Let It Be* for their own LP of the same name ('88). Laibach took this classic album to the factory for a total refit, with tracks like *Get Back* now taking on a more sinister feeling and *The Long And Winding Road* stripped back to a short and straight two minutes. "The Beatles were too important for the libidinal economy of the second part of the 20th Century to be left out of the interpretation," they say. Crucially, these songs were sonically reinvented with elements of folk music, classical motifs and, of course, rock arrangements, bringing new flavour to well-chewed gum. Their recent reinterpretations are equally diverse, from

In 1987, around the time of *Opus Dei*. Left, 1983





"Laibach are more than humble musicians and entertainers. Sometimes we do more with vision than sound"

Bob Dylan's *Ballad Of A Thin Man* to Warm Leatherette, best known by Grace Jones but actually penned by Mute label head Daniel Miller as *The Normal*.

On 1996's *Jesus Christ Superstars* they explored religious songs and, as well as the Andrew Lloyd Webber song the title was derived from, took on *The Cross* by Prince. At the other end of the scale, in 2008 there was the *Laibachbeimsterfuge* album that saw Laibach interpret Johann Sebastian Bach's *The Art Of Fugue* through electronic means as "Bach did not specify any instrumentation".

Although their cover versions have attracted widespread attention, Laibach's output is wonderfully diverse, from the theatrical soundtrack to a stage version of *Macbeth* ('90) to more polemical albums like *Kapital* ('92) and *NATO* ('94) that put capitalism and the military union of Europe itself under the sonic microscope. "In principle we are not trying to criticise or praise, but first of all analyse the relation between art and politics, culture and ideology," they explain. "But if you do find a relevant critique in our work which can serve

your understanding of things, then that was definitely our intention."

This weaving together of culture and the idea of nationality was further examined on *Volk* (2006) where the anthems, idioms and sonic identities of 14 countries like Spain, Germany, America, Japan and England were weighed by Laibach's scales. "We were always fascinated with the idea of an anthem, with these songs entire nations identify with emotionally, singing them fanatically and passionately. We were wondering why this is so, what all the fuss about anthems is and what are they saying. Also, are anthems good pop songs, and vice versa – could pop songs be good anthems?" *Volk* proved that they could, and deployed a different guest vocalist from each country on each anthem.

As with all bands, live performance was vitally important to Laibach in spreading their message, with a number of players and performers augmenting the ranks over the years. "Laibach are more than humble musicians and entertainers anyway and sometimes we do more with visual expression than with the sound," they state. Some live

concerts have been pageants of audio and visual sensory overload that mirror the heft of totalitarian displays of strength, whilst others are simply great rock concerts, like the band's performance in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in April which had, fittingly for Laibach, once been a power station. Typically, however, since the 80s Laibach's sound – like industrialists such as SPK and Front 242 and even Skinny Puppy before them – has also embraced technology to the extent that Laibach brought techno music into their armoury. "We always liked repetition in music and disco was among our main inspirations. We are not crazy about techno, but it's a relevant and legitimate form and sometimes serves the goal."

Thus a song like Europe's *The Final Countdown* was given Laibach's techno treatment, as was *Tanz Mit Laibach* (*Dance With Laibach!*). Laibach also managed to perfectly frame a musical portrait of Kraftwerk that sounds like a long lost brother of their seminal *Man Machine* track *The Robots*. "This track is just a rehearsal of a form, a 'Kraftwerkian' form," Laibach say. "It was published on the compilation of Kraftwerk covers, where – instead of doing a Kraftwerk song in a Laibach style, we decided to change one of our songs into a Kraftwerkian song. In fact we did a cover of a style which is automatically recognised as Kraftwerkian and really should be signed by them."

Like Kraftwerk, it is their image as well as a musically fluid yet recognizable style that has allowed Laibach to spread internationally and although lead singer Milan Fras is as recognisable to some followers as Thom Yorke is to Radiohead fanatics, the band still frame all of their portraits under one byline. "A collective principle is a collective principal and one can only practice it if he leaves a big part of himself outside of it. This is a price of working in collective, it is a very demanding task and only most liberated spirits can do it."

With two albums coming this year, Laibach, as "liberated spirits", still seem to have an appetite for work and plenty more creative spirit in the tank. ●



What do you mean, you didn't bring the pooper scooper?