

# Laibach: From Mount Paektu to Shepherds Bush



**LAIBACH**

**02 SHEPHERD'S BUSH EMPIRE**

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Photo: Marija Buljeta / AltVenger

**Laibach** might seem bonkers. They might even be bonkers. But there is a lot of method behind their staging of *The Sound of Music*.

To start with, it is in accordance with their plan that you will be seated. The band are playing theatres on this tour, so don't get any funny ideas about moving your hips.

The evening will start with a film: in this case, a documentary about Laibach's visit to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on the 70th anniversary of its liberation from Japanese militarism.

*Liberation Day* tracks the band as they prepare to present *The Sound of Music* in Pyongyang. It is the most internationalist thing in the world: a Slovenian art collective, travelling with some curious fans and their British label boss, putting on an American musical, written by the children of German Jews and set in Austria, for a film co-directed by a Latvian and Norwegian and financed by the Norwegian arts council, in the capital of North Korea.

Their visit in 2015 was not without controversy, either inside or outside of the DPRK. The right-wing press went nuts in the US and Europe. At their welcoming dinner, the representative of the official culture committee read the group some of the criticism received from his comrades. There were many, it seems, who couldn't cope with the invitation given to Laibach to stage the country's first Western "rock" show. Philistines raised the same arguments from both sides of the DMZ: Laibach make use of totalitarian imagery and styling; their music doesn't fit into conventional "rock" forms; and no one can control them.

The culture committee representative, to his credit, appeared to understand that Laibach is like a fairground mirror – reflecting the viewer in ways that confound their expectations. Born in a pseudo-socialist environment, which collaborated with and confronted foreign systems in accordance with the whims of Marshall Tito, Laibach well understand how to select and position images to provoke a response.



*Photo: Marija Buljeta / AltVenger*

Even so, before it can be put on, the show has to be run through a number

of filters: images from Korean culture that are insufficiently reverent have to go; translations have to be cleansed of South Korean idioms; the arrangement for “Arirang” must be normalised; and Nazi space ships have to give up their Maltese crosses.

The group accept these changes with good grace: the show must go on, so long as the power lines can be jerry-rigged and local busybodies can be pushed away. The collaboration works, and a sizeable but bemused audience takes in the performance politely.

The choice of the musical was to overcome the difficulty of selecting Western material that the North Korean audience would find acceptable. On paper, as one side of a cultural exchange, it makes sense. In the hands of Laibach, a band known for the low growl of Milan Fras’ vocals and martial rhythms, it sounds bonkers. In fact, it is brilliantly subversive.

*The Sound of Music* is one of the best known and loved musicals of all time. The film version, starring Julie Andrews, is one of the most viewed films globally. For Laibach to tackle the material makes sense on a number of grounds: they are more theatrical than “rock,” even if they make albums and appear with guitars and drums; the U-rated material invites repurposing just as readily as images from Christianity or Western political traditions; and the universal reach of the 1965 film means that the songs will be familiar wherever they go.

In fact, a careful balance is achieved between corruption and conformity: the performance is largely faithful to Rodgers & Hammerstein’s songs, while the use of propaganda graphics and Fras’ distinctive voice mine at the foundations of standard expectations. Idealisation of states, they seem to say, isn’t much different than idealisation of states of mind.



*Photo: Marija Buljeta / AltVenger*

The most significant change to the material is a tweak to ask, “How do you solve a problem like Korea?” Frasn hasn’t changed his typical head-dress; but, in the context of this performance, it takes on the resemblance of a nun’s veil.

The band are joined for this performance by Boris Benko and Marina Mårtensson, who both performed on the album version of the show. They add striking vocals that contrast with and complement Frasn’s own.

After the intermission (this is theatre and not a standard “rock” show, remember), the band returns to play a number of songs from the back catalogue. Mårtensson leads them onto the stage for a belting version of “Sympathy for the Devil,” her hair seemingly expanding as the song goes on.

There are some songs from their early days, which make good sense in the confines of a theatre. You can’t dance to them, but you would have fun trying.

The show comes to an end with some material from the *Iron Sky* movies, completing the conceptual arc from a film about music to music from films. Frasier exchanges his head-gear for a cowboy hat, which he tips to hoots and hollers from the audience: for certain, subverting music genres is one of their favourite things.