

MARTIAL LORE



In September 2022, **Laibach** performed a new work, *Alamut*, in their home city of Ljubljana with the Tehran Symphony Orchestra, with plans afoot to do it all over again in Iran in 2023 – turmoil willing. With *Wir Sind Das Volk (Ein Musical Aus Deutschland)*, released on vinyl and based around the subversive works of East German playwright Heiner Müller, now seems like a good time for *RC*'s **Jeremy Allen** to dive into the back catalogue of the iconoclastic Slovenians: from outrage in the former Yugoslavia to international notoriety in North Korea.

Like Joseph Conrad's Charles Marlow, Laibach are no strangers to the heart of darkness. The first western band ever to play in North Korea are looking to head behind enemy lines again. Iran, another supposedly avowed enemy of the west, will hopefully host a new score, *Alamut*, composed by the Slovenians alongside Iranian composers Nima Atrkar Rowshan and Idin Samimi Mofakham, and performed by the Tehran Symphonic Orchestra in its home city, diplomatic success permitting.

This is, after all, a country that lives under the control of its second supreme leader; the first one, the Ayatollah Khomeini, almost banned music in the country altogether. *Alamut*, based on the 1938 Vladimir Bartol novel concerning the life of Hassan-i Sabbah, is an ongoing project being put together with the help of the London-based cultural NPO, a/political. A film is expected, provided it gets the funding, and there was a performance of the score in Ljubljana last September, with Tehran to follow in 2023 if all goes to plan – and the current political turmoil allows it.

It's been 43 years since Laibach emerged from the small mining town of Trbovlje in the former Yugoslavia, and they've been courting controversy ever since. Even the name Laibach, taken from the historical German name for Ljubljana, was banned by the authorities in a volatile post-Tito Yugoslavia. In lieu of a band name, Laibach displayed their emblematic black cross on their records and posters, rendering the ban all but useless.

"After World War II, the name Laibach was condemned simply because it was German. So, we started to use it as our own name, as we don't like things to be condemned just like that," writes Ivan Novak, Laibach's appointed mouthpiece, to *RC* via email. "Plus, it gave us the necessary undertone for what we were doing. An important Slovenian philosopher, Taras Kermauner, wrote in his essay on Laibach in 1983 that using the name was the most explosive and Dadaistic invention in the poetics of the group."

English is a second language for Laibach, and while Novak – aka Ivo Saliger – speaks it fluently, he prefers to take his time over his answers so that Laibach speak as one collective voice. The band have always been misunderstood, often due to Laibach's own propensity for agitation. But misunderstandings cause problems. Laibach have been beset by problems in their four decades, which they somehow usually manage to overcome and keep going.

Founding frontman Tomaž Hostnik, who only appears on the live album *Ljubljana–Zagreb–Beograd* recorded at the Križanke auditorium in September 1982 (it wasn't released until 1993), took his own life the

same year the show was recorded: "Of course, Hostnik's suicide completely shocked us at the time, and we were even thinking of disbanding the group," Novak admits. "Some of the founding members actually left at that time because it was all becoming too dangerous. The rest of us decided that Laibach as a mission was more important than our individual lives and that this adventure had to continue. And it did."

Laibach forged forward and broke out of Slovenia to worldwide attention thanks to the implementation of their 'New Originals', a kind of Duchampian reappropriation of other people's ideas, or more prosaically, cover versions – not that they'll hear a word of such talk. The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Queen, Austrian oompah-rockers Opus, have all had the Laibach treatment.

"FOR 30 YEARS WE HAVE BEEN TOLD WE ARE OUTDATED"

Their first love, though, was the theatre, and they've come full circle this year, with a double album *Wir Sind Das Volk*, the score of a play they staged at the Berlin HAU in 2020. It was halted after three performances because of Covid-19, though it subsequently resumed at the venue earlier this year and in other theatres across Europe.

The world may have stopped temporarily, but it didn't stop Laibach, who as well as *Wir Sind Das Volk* and *Alamut*, are intending to finally release the soundtrack to the critically panned *Iron Sky: The Coming Race* this year. "Low culture – high culture – we don't differentiate between the two," they say. Scoring musicals has been a feature of the group's work: *Also Sprach Zarathustra*,

Macbeth and the NSK production, *Baptism* (full name: *Krst Pod Triglavom – Baptism Below Triglav*), and more.

Wir Sind Das Volk is slightly different in that it comes from the fragments of East German playwright Heiner Müller's assorted plays, some of which last no longer than 10 minutes. Thirty-eight years ago, Laibach's music accompanied the playwright's *Quartet*, performed at the Slovene National Theatre, so there's a strong sense of affinity with Müller, given the subversive nature of their work.

"He began his career two decades before us and in a different media, but we both were regime *outlaws*: Müller in the GDR, Laibach in SFRJ," Novak explains. "The regime officials censored us, banned us and

wanted to abolish us both, or at least spit us out from the countries as dissidents. We did not allow them this pleasure. We insisted on staying. In the end, they gave up and accepted us as their own."

Whatever they put their minds to, whether remaking The Beatles' *Let It Be* in its entirety or recording a DPRK-inspired take on *The Sound Of Music*, they never do anything by halves. Even their interviews are suffused with a sense of commitment. *RC* receives a 7,500-word document in answer to 50 or so questions, and one of those – 'How Do You Solve a Problem Like Korea?' (a slightly flippant repurposing of their own track) – leads to a staggered three-point geopolitical breakdown of everything that needs to be done to achieve Korean unification.

Laibach are sometimes distrusted for their ambiguity, but they shoot from the hip. Still, in the post-truth age, where binary opinions drive the culture wars, could Laibach get cancelled?

"For more than 30 years, critics have been telling us that our model is outdated, that Laibach simply has no place anymore in the world, that we belong to the Cold War era, etc," Novak writes. "But then, events keep happening that confirm our assumptions, and our albums are still generally well-received in various media, so there's really no need for us to worry about the fear of emasculation yet."

A propitious moment, *RC* thinks, to dive into Laibach's extensive – and challenging – back catalogue.



Keyboard warrior: Laibach's Mina Spiler onstage in Dresden, 2010



Laibach (ŠKUC – ULP 1600, 1985) £45

A landmark of martial industrial, a genre more or less invented for Laibach, the debut album was held up in production for several years for political reasons. The band did release one tape prior in 1983 called *Through The Occupied Netherlands*. It features *Brat Moj (My Brother)*, which was remade in 2020 on *Laibach Revisited* and still features in live sets.

Laibach: “We wanted to conceive our own genre, which we first called ‘militant industrial classicism’. We really wanted to draw a parallel between the production of culture and industrial production, and between the ideological nature of popular music and military music. Some theories say that popular music is a direct outgrowth of military music, which is not impossible. That’s probably why a lot of bands in the 60s wore uniforms, and that’s why we did our first tours dressed in Yugoslav army uniforms. The Yugoslav army, by the way, was then officially a politically non-aligned army.

“The artwork for *Laibach* was inspired by the German satirist and montage pioneer John Heartfield, and we absolutely saw ourselves as part of the lineage of the avant-garde. We were lucky enough to chance upon Brion Gysin [cut-ups pioneer] and William Burroughs performing at the Final Academy event in London’s Brixton in 1982. We defined this Laibach method of recycling, appropriating, cut-upping and quoting the historic avant-garde material in 1983 as the *retro-avant-garde*. Its pretext was that history is not sacred, nothing is or should be original, so let’s inspire ourselves directly with this historic *supermarket* of artworks... let’s DJ art history. This was – and very much still is – Laibach’s artistic philosophy.

“With the help of the cultural activist and punk ideologist Igor Vidmar, we signed a contract with the Slovenian state label

ZKP RTV Ljubljana in 1982 and started recording the debut album in the city’s metro studio. Due to a public outcry against a now infamous television interview [that] we did on the main news programme of RTV Ljubljana, there came an official ban on the use of the name Laibach and, consequently, on the band’s activities. The label terminated the contract and handed back to us the material we’d already recorded. We were able to release it without the band’s name and in a partially censored form in 1985 on the independent ŠKUC label, the student cultural centre label which was more or less run by the aforementioned Vidmar.”



Nova Akropola (Cherry Red Records – BRED 67, 1986) £15

The montages of dislocated drum-beats and aural detritus go up a notch on *Nova Akropola*. Several tracks were re-recorded for the second album when it was thought the first might not see the light of day, including *Država* and *Panorama*. *Die Liebe, meanwhile, is a monstrous banger.*

Laibach: “We weren’t influenced by hip-hop directly, although we appreciated many hip-hop artists, especially Public Enemy and Eric B & Rakim. At the beginning we thought that singing and Laibach did not go well together, but we were influenced more by Marinetti, Russolo and Mayakovsky, by Tito, Lenin, Mussolini, Churchill, Castro and later by Muhammad Ali, The Last Poets, Gilbert and Sullivan, by Arnold Schoenberg and Serge Gainsbourg.

“We always had the desire to do very different kinds of music, from minimal to classical, from experimental industrial to pop, depending on the subject we were working on. And we wanted to develop a *female* kind of Laibach as well. In fact, we had a sub-project, called *Germania*,

which was supposed to be the feminine version of Laibach.

“*Nova Akropola* was [vocalist] Milan Fras’ first album, but he only appears on a few tracks; there are several vocalists beside Fras. He brought the look and feel of Buster Keaton to the group; Buster Keaton with a unique roaring voice. People keep asking us what sound effects we use for his voice, but none of them really have any effect on them.”



Opus Dei (Mute – STUMM 44, 1987) £20

Laibach began their long association with Mute records with their international breakthrough record *Opus Dei*, signing a contract in the presence of Daniel Miller and Diamanda Galás at the label’s new premises on Harrow Road. With ‘new originals’ of Queen and *Opus*, the Slovenians were off to a flyer.

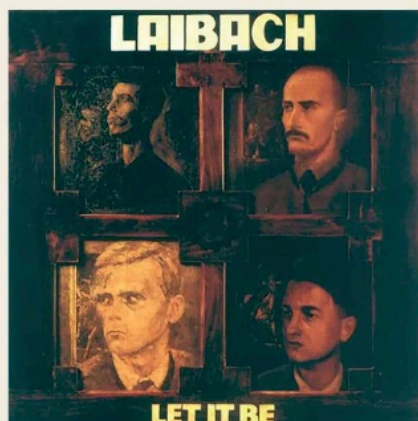
Laibach: “We don’t do covers; we do interpretations and new originals. Regarding the *Opus* song *Live Is Life* – we simply couldn’t stand it anymore; it was played on the radio all the time and we were getting sick of it, so we wanted to prepare the alternative version as revenge. We decided to rewrite it in our own way, and through the alchemical process extracted from it what was really hidden within it.

“When we were working on this idea in the Tivoli studio in Ljubljana, Slavko Avsenik Jr. happened to step into the room. We did not know him personally, but his father – also Slavko Avsenik – was a planetary star of accordion folk music, a sort of Mittel-European king of polkas and waltzes who was supposed to have sold more albums than The Beatles. We quickly invited his son to join us [in] reworking *Live Is Life*, and so the idea gradually took flesh. We tweaked the lyrics a bit, made a translation for the German version of the song, and that’s how we came up with the two versions that launched Laibach into the international consciousness.

“On top of that, we nailed the album with the German ‘transcription’ of Queen’s *One Vision*, naming it ‘Geburt Einer Nation’ or *The Birth Of The Nation*, and that was that. Avsenik Jr arranged the whole album with us and later worked with us again on some other albums, but we weren’t

"WE DEFINE OUR METHOD AS RETRO AVANT-GARDE"

allowed to reveal his name at the time – at his request, because his collaboration with Laibach might have compromised his father's work and his family's good name."



Let It Be (Mute – STUMM 58, 1988)
£15

'New originals' reached their apotheosis with a complete reworking of arguably the worst album by the world's greatest band, though the recent Peter Jackson Get Back film has brought the original Let It Be into sharp relief. Laibach followed their version with eight different takes on The Rolling Stones' *Sympathy For The Devil*, including two versions by Germania, Laibach's female alter-ego.

Laibach: "These 'new originals' are new interpretations of the world's greatest band and – as far as we were concerned – the greatest UK cultural-colonialist weapon. We chose their last album because it was the most interesting to us, ending the important era in the history of superior cultural colonialism. It is probably not at all clear to you, and the rest of the Brits, what a huge role The Beatles and other Western popular culture played in instilling a sense of cultural and political inferiority in the Eastern communist countries. And, of course, what intense liberation potential at the same time this culture represented for a strictly or partially tightened communist bloc.

"Unfortunately, we cannot have an eight-hour Peter Jackson documentary about the making of Laibach's *Let It Be*, because in the 80s we did a very poor job of documenting our studio recordings, and even the little that was documented has been lost over the years. So only a fictional reconstruction of those events would be possible today. Of course, there was a lot going on with Laibach at the end of 80s and all we can say at this moment is that we had a very difficult time putting this album together. We almost broke up ourselves after this release.

"The Beatles and The Rolling Stones were always notions that existed together, in that order, and secondly, we like the literary value and the complexity of the references in *Sympathy For The Devil*: it simply is a remarkable piece of music that we wanted to approach in every possible way. They don't make songs like that anymore."



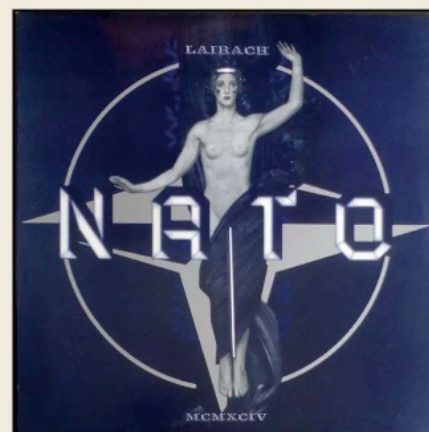
Kapital (Mute – STUMM 82, 1992)
£50

A more dance-oriented album, *Kapital* arrived in the same year as the book *The End Of History And The Last Man* by Francis Fukuyama, though Laibach's worldview was at odds with that somewhat short-sighted and optimistic take.

Laibach: "When we were working on *Kapital*, the Berlin Wall had already fallen, the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact were collapsing, Czechoslovakia was splitting up and war had started in Yugoslavia. Military barricades were erected right outside our studio while we were finishing the recording. The world – or at least a large part of our world – was acting as if everything was falling apart, but in reality, the cards were just being reshuffled. It represented the end of an era of communist understanding of *Kapital* and the beginning of capitalist domination of capital.

"Sonically speaking, this was when some new digital audio workstations and MIDI sequencer software applications appeared on the market, and we also managed to buy a few Akai samplers, so this new technology pulled us into its logic of production. We were just experimenting with these toys that

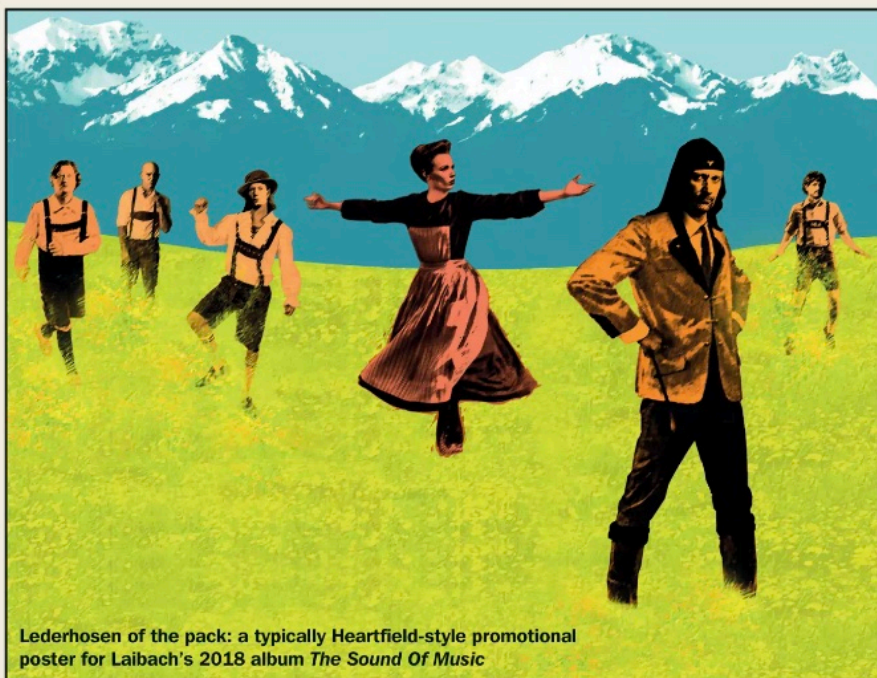
we had in our hands for the first time. DJ Shadow's *Building Steam With A Grain Of Salt* certainly sounds very similar to *Wirtschaft Ist Tot*. When we were on tour playing material from *Kapital*, we had quite a few people in the audience from the hip-hop scene, especially in the US... We were stealing from them, and they were probably stealing from us."



NATO (Mute – STUMM121, 1994) £50

A collection of war-themed covers, including Europe's *The Final Countdown*. The acronymous NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) feels even closer to the bone now than it did in 1994 (five years before the aerial bombing campaign of the former Yugoslavia). Laibach followed it with a live album, *Occupied Europe NATO Tour 1994-95*, in 1996.

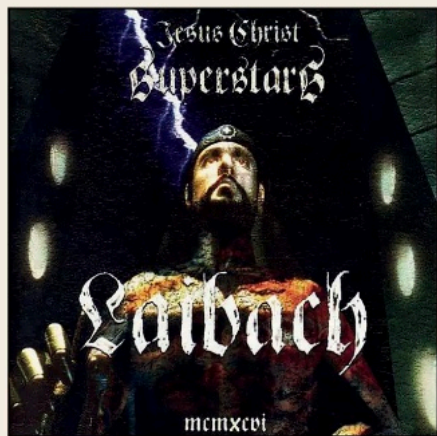
Laibach: "In fact, we anticipated, or rather touched upon, some of the events that happened later, including 11 September 2001, with the adaptations of *God Is God* and *In The Year 2525*; the war in Ukraine with the 2014 video *Dance, Vladimir Putin!* released in the context of *The Iron Sky* film promotion; Brexit with Eurovision, and



Lederhosen of the pack: a typically Heartfield-style promotional poster for Laibach's 2018 album *The Sound Of Music*

many more. We should also mention that two NATO Secretary-Generals have received our album as a gift from the Slovenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"The war in Ukraine is a different case, although there are indeed some similarities with the Yugoslav Wars. We did not believe that Putin would really start this war, but for a long time we had a bad feeling that it might happen, nevertheless. We recorded our new original of The Final Countdown by Europe around 1992, and incorporated it into our set around then."

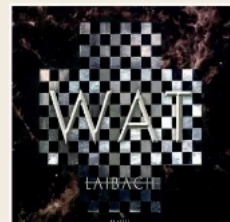


Jesus Christ Superstars (Mute – STUMM 136, 1996) £80

Laibach dabbled in rock opera with their Andrew Lloyd Webber-inspired Jesus Christ Superstars, an album where even seemingly straight renditions go through a form of transubstantiation that turns them instantly into something uniquely Laibachian.

Laibach: "It's a miracle; everything sounds different when it goes through Laibach software, everything gets a different meaning. We don't really know why. We are certainly not some kind of die-hard anti-Christians. Let's say we believe in God, but we don't trust her.

"There's no bitterness that bands like Rammstein took that sound and made lots of money with it: Rammstein are a great stadium rock band, and we wouldn't be capable of doing that. And – to be honest – guitar rock is, on top of that, quite alien music to us. We made a trip into this genre to draw some conservative aesthetic and conceptual parallels between musicals, religion, and rock concerts, and partly because we had a band that could play that kind of music easily. And – we must admit – also partly because we were going on a long tour in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine and the audiences there really enjoyed the kind of music at that time. In fact, Germans liked it, too. And Americans as well."



WAT (Mute – STUMM 223, 2003) £100

The double-album of Laibach's hard techno WAT from 2003 has become rather collectable

since its release nearly 20 years ago when vinyl was scarce.

Laibach: "WAT did, in fact, open up Laibach to some new audiences. But we are sceptical about our audience, and we like to tantalise it, never offering up the same dish twice. We don't like to see an audience getting old with us. But we may well put together a WAT 2 in the next few years for younger generations – at least, we are partly toying with the idea. We are educating them. If they want a safe pleasure and a comfortable identification point, then Laibach is probably not the right medium.

"Now You Will Pay on WAT sounds prehistoric, but it's super-modern again because of war. Laibach becomes more relevant in times of geopolitical tensions, unfortunately."



Volk (Mute – CD STUMM 276, 2006) £10

Volk is Laibach's only album to be released solely on CD format, an emotionally charged collection of reworked national anthems, anticipating the rise of nationalism across Europe.

Laibach: "We had been thinking about which are the most popular songs of all time among different nations, and which pop songs the masses identified with the most. We realised that national anthems are really such great songs, even if we must listen to them out of obligation. We were curious what these songs were also saying and how they would sound if Laibach did them. We think the result was quite interesting. There were no objections of a patriotic nature, at least not that we knew of. There was nothing offensive in our interpretations.

"Volk did partly anticipate the rise of nationalism, though there were a lot of nationalistic uprisings across Europe at that time. And it is still happening. Nationalism never really ends, it just sleeps. Of course,



there must be some nationalism in every culture, otherwise there would be no difference in these global times. Which, of course, is not OK, either."

Spectre (Mute – STUMM 358, 2014) £20

More provocative art-pop on an album where the mask perhaps slips: with calls for social justice, equitable division of assets and freedom for Assange, Snowden and Manning on The Whistleblowers.

Laibach: "The Bond film with the same title came out several years after our album, but we were originally inspired by the early Bond films as well. Spectre also had some relationship with Yugoslav secret organisations after World War II, and with informal Slovenian political organisations since Slovenia became independent. So, it's all interconnected. Maybe we should also mention that once, at a garden party at the British Consulate in LA, we met and had a nice conversation with a legendary German actor, Walter Gotell, who played the Russian General Gogol in many Bond films, and he told us a lot about Spectre. And he would certainly know!

"We sang the lyric, 'Europe is falling apart' on Eurovision, and given that the biggest country in Europe is fighting a bloody war and is being attacked by an even bigger country on the European continent and at the same time the biggest country in the world – how does that sound to you? It seems that Laibach will have to stop predicting the future, because our predictions very quickly turn into the present. Europe is constantly disintegrating, but it seems that somehow this 'disintegration' is really a particular way in which Europe reconstitutes itself. Every time it fails, it builds itself up better and every time it tries to rebuild itself, it fails even more."

"LAIBACH WILL HAVE TO STOP PREDICTING THE FUTURE"



Power in the darkness: Laibach in 1994, promoting the NATO album (l-r: Saliger, Eber, Dachauer, Keller); (inset right) concert posters channel a characteristic Cold War propaganda style



***The Sound Of Music* (Mute – STUMM 430, 2018) £20**

Laibach's astonishing tour of North Korea in 2015 spawned the documentary *Liberation Day* and the album *The Sound Of Music*. Ivan Novak explains why they don't consider themselves useful idiots for Kim Jong-un.

Laibach: "Throughout our career we've been looking for an opportunity to sink our teeth into *The Sound Of Music*. When we received an invitation to perform in Pyongyang, we knew the moment had finally arrived. *The Sound Of Music* is probably the only piece of American pop culture that is not only allowed but actively promoted by the North Korean authorities. For years now

the musical has been part of their school curricula. Hence, it seemed only natural that we address the people of North Korea with something as universal as *The Sound Of Music*. Therefore, we decided to create the concert programme around our interpretations of the songs from this musical. The story fits well in the North Korean situation and can be understood affirmatively, but also subversively, very much depending on the point of view.

"Without *The Sound Of Music*, there probably would be no Laibach. As children we watched the film many times. It shaped our universe in an important way; we all wanted to be part of the Von Trapp family, wearing uniforms, singing uprising anthems and sharing a bed with Maria. And we also understood it as a lecture about music and its power over good and bad ideologies and politics. When we realised that the story was based on real people and events who lived not far from us – in Croatian Pula and Austrian Salzburg – we became even more enthusiastic.

"This film is, of course, first and foremost the apotheosis of Hollywood standards and entertainment industry clichés, but there are plenty of perverse twists and turns, as well as sexual and psychoanalytical connotations. Slavoj Žižek makes a very interesting observation when he

says that the film officially depicts Austrian resistance to Hitler and the Nazis in principle, but if we look closely, we see that 'the Nazis are presented as an abstract cosmopolitan occupying force, and the Austrians are good little fascists, so that the implicit message is almost the opposite of the explicit one'. No wonder the Austrians do not like this film very much, or perhaps they are only in denial about it on the surface, secretly watching it in their basements. Žižek believes that the film has perhaps been so hugely popular because it 'addresses our secret fascist dream'. Which is an interesting statement, given that most of the creators who made the original musical were Jewish.

"We went there to express our respect to the North Korean people and to support their tendencies for reunification of the Korean peninsula into one state. Kim Jong-un is very probably the Prisoner No 1 in a golden cage, and he only needs to perform the strong leader role, otherwise his life would be endangered. It is not very clear how much actual power he really has, but in principle there are several power centres in the country. He would probably prefer to play basketball with Dennis Rodman if he only could." ¹⁰

***Wir Sind Das Volk (Ein Musical Aus Deutschland)* is on Mute. *The Love Is Still Alive EP* is issued this month.**