

Nina Hagen Band - Nina Hagen Band (1978)

Written by bluesever

Tuesday, 04 May 2010 12:01 - Last Updated Tuesday, 18 September 2018 17:14

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01. *TV-Glotzer (White Punks on Dope) (Michael Evans, Bill Spooner, Roger Steen)* — 5:13
02. *Rangehn (Bernhard Potschka)* — 3:25
03. *Unbeschreiblich weiblich (Manfred Praeker)* — 3:30
04. *Auf'm Bahnhof Zoo (Manfred Praeker, Reinhold Heil)* — 5:24
05. *Naturträne (Nina Hagen)* — 4:05
06. *Superboy (Herwig Mitteregger)* — 4:01
07. *Heiß (Manfred Praeker, Bernhard Potschka, Reinhold Heil, Herwig Mitteregger)* — 4:07
08. *Fisch im Wasser (Nina Hagen)* — 0:55
09. *Auf'm Friedhof (Bernhard Potschka, Herwig Mitteregger)* — 6:13
10. *Der Spinner (Herwig Mitteregger)* — 3:15
11. *Pank (Ariane Forster)* — 1:44

Personnel:

- Nina Hagen - lead female vocals
- Manfred Praeker - bass, vocals
- Bernhard Potschka - guitar, vocals
- Herwig Mitteregger - drums, vibraphone
- Reinhold Heil – keyboards

Nina Hagen Band, the album, was recorded in 1978 in West Berlin (if I'm not mistaken - reliable info on Nina Hagen is hard to come by on the Web), shortly after Nina Hagen's emigration to the rotten stagnating capitalist part of the world, and the band here includes expressive rotten stagnating capitalist guitarist Bernhard Potschka, skilful rotten stagnating capitalist keyboardist Reinhold Heil and, uh, others I could name but I'm not sure if that should form part of our game. So much for trivia. Now I know I have sort of an unholy fetish about giving out unusually high ratings to "raw" debut albums, but at least it beats stealing lingerie. After all, in a perfect world unmarred by useless complications, people would understand and accept such a crude binary approach: either you cut it right out there from the beginning, or you simply just don't cut it at all.

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No great band has ever released a completely worthless debut album (despite what they'd have you believe about From Genesis To Revelation), and quite a few great artists came into the open already fully equipped. Not that the songs on this album were Nina Hagen's first recordings, actually (apparently, some of the earlier material which she recorded while still in East Germany can be found floating around - see more details in the reader comments section), but it was her first coherent, cohesive LP, and this certainly qualifies as a debut.

Alas, like pretty much every "limited" European release, Nina Hagen Band is not very well known to the world's audiences. As far as my opinion is concerned, it should be. Why? For quite a simple reason: it's one of the best, one of the most quintessential "art-punk" albums ever released. Most quintessential, because in this particular case, "art-punk" does not decode as "deconstructed punk music" a la Wire or someone of that rank; here, it decodes as "punk music effectively crossed with elements of classical art", and God forbid you from flashing visions of the Electric Light Orchestra through your head in response. (Nothing against ELO, but these guys were always at their best when they just stuck to cello-driven pop).

But more than that, Nina Hagen Band is one of the most personality-filled albums of its epoch I know of. Now it's true that the late Seventies have produced quite a few female performers of merit, from Kate Bush to Siouxsie Sioux and so on. However, in terms of diversity, dedication, adventurousness and professionalism Nina Hagen has them all beat on this debut. Energy, experimentalism, and efficiency: this album beams with life, and even if it ends up seriously annoying you (and I see how it would), there's absolutely no denying the power, the vivaciousness, and the unusualness of the thing. She may be an angel, or a demon, but she won't be a mere "good-for-nothing" for anyone.

In terms of pure songwriting, or, rather, melody-writing, there's not that much to laud - my first impression was that I was listening to the German equivalent of Patti Smith (confer the vocal intro to 'Unbeschreiblich Weiblich' with Patti's 'Ask The Angels' and you'll see what I mean), the only difference being a more varied approach to the material: the music on here ranges from cheesy dance rhythms to typically New Wave structures to ballads to barroom boogie to Seventies' hard-rock. However, repeated listens eventually bring out bits and pieces of solid melodies, and after some time you begin to realize that the key to appreciating this music lies in the ability to understand the WILDNESS of it all. It doesn't matter if the melody is not too memorable, or if the melody is downright generic, or downright stolen; it matters that every one of these bits has a ferocious drive of its own, and that there's so many of them, you're supposed to be blinded by the kaleidoscopic effect instead of meticulously smashing the kaleidoscope with a rock and then leaving in disappointment over the unexclusiveness of each and every single little piece of coloured glass.

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In any case it's not the melodies that are the main point of obsession on here, it's the performance. Nina Hagen unveils herself as a wild, uncompromising, spluttering punk goddess on here, mainly through the maniacal, "cavewoman" strength of her vocal cords, because when you come to think of it, only the very last track on the album follows the typical punk musical structure ('Pank' has the obligatory chainsaw buzz and lasts all of 1:44 - what else would you need?). Whatever the variations in the actual music, though, it's always the voice that matters.

For one thing, how often do you have operatic singers successfully bridging the distance between the 'highest' and the 'lowest' genres? Nina's East Germany training certainly turned out to be productive; "Naturträne" has to be heard to be believed, an almost - I hesitate to say the word - gorgeous Wagnerian "aria" about the simple beauty of life, culminating in a series of ear-splitting vocal gymnastics that you haven't heard since at least 'Child In Time' (and actually, I can't believe Nina's hysterical ever-rising singing on that one was not intended as a conscious attempt to throw Ian Gillan off his pedestal, and she succeeds). You gotta appreciate Nina's range on that one: while on some tracks she sings in a low gruff baritone, the highest note that ends 'Naturträne' might just be the highest note ever heard on a rock record. Totally ecstatic. Yet what actually pushes this over the edge is her ability to not come across as overblown. Her punk is actually delivered with more authenticity than her opera - and both her punk and her opera are always delivered with a mild sense of irony, so salvaging for the overall effect.

Of course, 'Naturträne' is far from the only highlight. On 'TV Glotzer', a reworking of the Tubes' 'White Punks On Dope' with German lyrics (well, actually, everything here is in German - that's kinda natural for a debut album released in West Germany. DUH!), Nina screams and bellows so much that she puts any concurrent punk singer to shame, at the same time managing to throw a few quick blasts of sarcasm towards the average TV-watching Joe. On 'Rangehn' her hysteria is perfectly supported by the band's dexterous interplay, even if the punk is suddenly gone, replaced by "white funk", I guess, or whatever you call that style; the guitar player's got a good tone too. And then there's 'Unbeschreiblich Weiblich', distinguished by, on one side, the album's most unforgettable synth riff (even if the skeleton of the song is pure garage-rock), on the other side, the no-holds-barred lyrics: the song must be one of the fiercest pro-abortion statements ever put on record. At times, when I hear Nina spit out the 'Ich hab' keine Pflicht! (I have no duty!)' line, I envision her standing on one cup of the scale with the entire Catholic church on the other and guess who's weightier.

Some of the songs (naturally) feature a more mystical, more Goth-influenced atmosphere, although I gotta say that for a German singer, Nina Hagen almost criminally underrated the importance of Goth for that kind of music. Even when something like 'Heiss' comes along, with its nervous guitar passages in the background and threatening breathy singing, it's still undermined by corny tee-hee-hees and that dang reggae riff. Reggae? In a dark castle-and-torture-chamber-type song? (Never mind that the lyrics are just about being horny -

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they're in German anyway). Ridiculous. But cool! As is 'Auf'm Friedhof', this time an actually dark song about the everyday life of a pair of vampires, a song that has it all - gory lyrics, unexpected fusion-style keyboard solos, Star Wars-like synth bleeps, blood-curdling yells and yelps, and, of course, the inescapable declaration of God's death.

There's no attempt anywhere to be really serious (unless you count the lyrics to 'Unbeschreiblich Weiblich'), and yet this music crashes so many taboos that it's hard to merely judge this effort as a piece of dated goofy product. It's a bit inconsistent to be rated as Nina's highest, and her second effort would actually manage to beat it in terms of depth, diversity, and entertainment value, but the fact is that all of Nina Hagen is already here, limbs, fluids, and dharmas. Which makes it a must-have for all fans of Creative Forces Worldwide in the late 70s. ---starling.rinet.ru

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