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Laughing Eyes Jazz legend Coco Schumann is turning 85 - and still playing - By Thomas Winkler

The guitar and jazz are his life - and they even saved it once. Coco Schumann had to play music in concentration camps and kept silent about it for a long time. Today, he can talk about those days. He tells schoolchildren his story, which includes his music, of course.

He just can't stop. The farewell handshake has been exchanged but the entertainer in Coco Schumann is warmed up now. "One more joke for the road," he called, still standing in his doorway.

Yes, of course! "Every morning I look at myself in the mirror," he said before a perfectly timed pause, his face alight with the pleasure of anticipating the punch line. "And every morning I hope that maybe I'll be as old as I look someday."

In fact, Schumann hardly looks a day younger than the 85-year-old he will soon become. Why shouldn't his folds and wrinkles reveal his age, after everything that he has experienced and been through: his success in the jazz cellars of Berlin; his triumphs in the German pop industry; the hard cruise ship circuit, the music, the alcohol and the women. But he was also persecuted and feared for his life in Theresienstadt and Auschwitz.

The wrinkles that line his face are deep. And the hands he has used to play the guitar like almost no other for three-quarters of a century are coarse and worn. They look as if Schumann had tilled the fields every day of his life instead of playing with Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald.

His eyes are the first thing you notice when you meet Schumann. They always look a bit fresh and friendly but are quietly mocking as well. They have a lively twinkle and hold no bitterness. They detail the greeting of each new day with joy - maybe the type of joy that only someone who has been given the gift of life more than once can feel. "I'm grateful to fate," he said. "Many good things have happened to me."

Schumann received the gift of life for the first time on May 14, 1924 from his mother, a Jewish hairdresser. After leading an untroubled childhood in exciting Berlin, he was given life again and again. He was half Jewish in Nazi Germany and every day that he hid his yellow star in his jacket pocket and went to a semi-legal club to hear jazz - and later, play it - could have been his last one. After he was arrested in 1943 and transported to

Theresienstadt, where he and other Jewish jazz greats played with the Ghetto Swingers, every new day was a gift. And more than ever at Auschwitz, where the SS assigned him to play "La Paloma" again and again so that the deportees would go from the ramp to the gas chamber calmly. "We made music in Hell," Schumann wrote in his memoir 50 years later.

Until then, he had kept silent. It didn't matter whether he was celebrating his success in Helmut Zacharias' band in postwar Germany, heading out for Australia to start over again there or trying to make it as a pop musician back in his beloved Berlin: The story of his survival was taboo for Schumann. When people asked him about it, he answered that he had been in Auschwitz but didn't want to talk about it. He did not want to go down in history as a Holocaust survivor who also made music; he is a musician who had also been in concentration camps. That is important to him.

You can understand that when you see him play: when he lets his broad fingers run up and down the neck of the guitar with the relaxed tranquility age brings; when the guitar comes to life in his hands and compliantly subordinates itself to the sound of the band - but then soars up to claim a solo part. The way Schumann commands his instrument with such self-assurance and, most of all, the aplomb with which he sets pauses are unrivaled. He says that not everyone who can use a typewriter is also a writer. People who have seen and heard how Schumann can tell stories with his music know why he was called the "German Django Reinhardt."

The musician has lived in his small house in Berlin-Dahlem for 40 years. He has gotten by - at least most of the time. But he has always had jazz. His country has also recognized him: In 1989, he received the Federal Cross of Merit; last year, he was honored with the Berlin Order of Merit. "Order, that sounds too military to me," was his response.

Germany has felt more foreign to him in the past few years because neo-Nazis are becoming more visible and are spreading their reprehensible ideology. So he picks himself up and goes to

schools to tell the story of his life because he believes it is important for young people to concern themselves with that era. He doesn't know whether or not it helps. But even if he can't change things, he still has his guitar, jazz and music. "As long as I can," said Schumann. "I'll make music."

Les Paul, the legendary guitarist and instrument maker, recently sent him a postcard. Schumann gets it from the hallway. "He is 96 and still plays," he said. And how is his own health? It's time for another joke: "I can't complain enough."

Picture above: A lifetime attachment to his instrument: Coco Schumann and his guitar.