

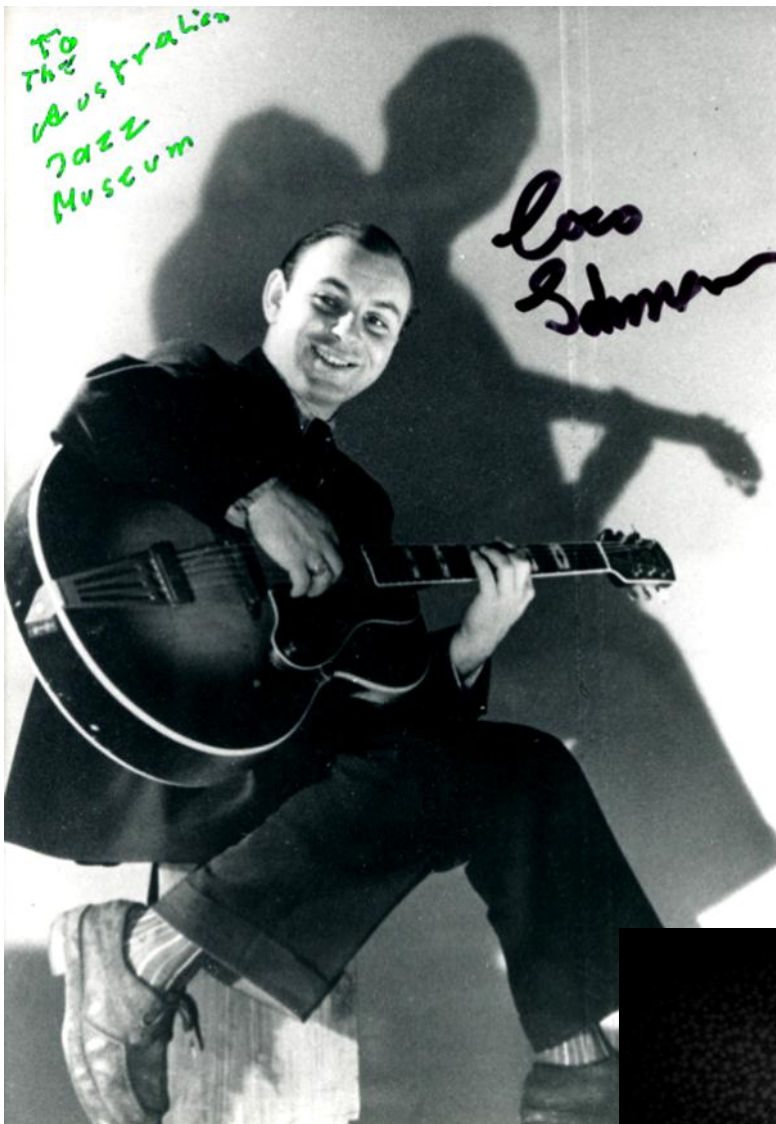


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Coco Schumann



COCO SCHUMANN - A SWING LEGEND

By Detlef Ott compiled by Ralph Powell



In November last year Detlef and Kerstin Ott visited the Australian Jazz Museum seeking information on their friend and compatriot, German jazz guitarist, Coco Schumann. They spent several hours at the Museum and were both delighted and impressed with the resources made available.

The following is translated from the original German article by Detlef Ott entitled "Solange ich Musik mache, habe ich keine Zeit, alt zu werden" published in the Just For Swing Gazette (Vol. 6, April 2014 pp.10-11)

"As long as I make music, I have no time to grow old"

Coco Schumann – a Swing Legend celebrates his 90th Birthday

AS a teenager of 12 Heinz Jakob Schumann often listened to the swing orchestras behind the fence of the legendary Entertainment Palaces of Berlin. This was in 1936. Later a friend, a French girl who couldn't pronounce "Heinz," called him Coco which became his stage name.

It seems not so long ago that his 85th birthday was celebrated with a big Gala in Berlin, and also in a theatre in Hamburg with a show about his life. On May 14th, 2014 the legendary Swing guitarist turned 90. "*Solange ich Musik mache, habe ich keine Zeit alt zu werden.*" — As long as I make music, I have no time to grow old. His spirit is that of a young man. Much has been written about his life in recent years. His autobiography, "*Der Ghetto-Swinger — Eine Jazzlegende erzählt*" from 1997 moved many people to tears. From this time on he often spoke about his life which he had never done before during concerts and readings, but especially in front of students and teachers in schools. He doesn't become tired of answering the same questions, although they bring back bad memories. "*Bis heute kann ich wirklich nicht begreifen, dass ich das Inferno lebend verlassen konnte, während Millionen andere sterben mussten ... Warum sie, warum nicht ich?*" — Even today I can't understand that I survived that inferno and millions of other people had to die ... Why them, why not me?

Coco was introduced to Jazz and Swing

while listening to the newest records from the USA on portable Gramophone players. With Ella Fitzgerald's "A Tisket, a Tasket" he became infected with the Swing virus. Later, he became a great fan of Teddy Stauffer whom he listened to in the famous Delphi Palace in Berlin in 1936. It was this music that helped save his life.

When he went to school it became clear to him that, as he had a Jewish mother, he was a "Halbarier" (Half Arian) under the law of the Nazi regime. "*Menschen wie wir wurden 'Mampe' genannt. Mampe war ein Berliner Likör, Halb und Halb.*" — People like me were called 'Mampe'. Mampe was a special liquor in Berlin, half and half. Despite this he was not interested in politics, concentrating on playing guitar and drums. From 1940 on he took every chance to play with Bands in order to entertain Berlin audiences. His great skills allowed him to learn the repertoire very rapidly and he watched the other players to develop his skills.

His Swing feeling became legendary. Hans Korseck was pivotal to Coco's development. Korseck played guitar in the United States with Benny Goodman and became Coco's teacher. But the government made it more and more difficult to play Swing. Over the years Coco was able to play even though he had no cabaret card from the so-called "Reichsmusikkammer" - State Music Bureau. Nevertheless, he recorded for broadcasts and records mostly with the

violin player Helmut Zacharias with whom he was befriended until his death in 2002.

In 1943 Coco was denounced and was sent to the "Ghetto" Theresienstadt, which was a special concentration camp that the Nazis used for their propaganda to show the world that they'd protect the Jews. Music helped Coco to get through the daily life of overcrowded rooms, hunger, illness and the daily fear of unexpected transports into the death camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau. He became the drummer of the so called "Ghetto Swingers", a Swing orchestra that was founded in 1943 and that was led by Bedrich "Fricke" Weiss, and later by the piano player Martin Roman, who was, for a short time, the piano player of the Weintraub Syncopators and Secco's Gitanos which performed mainly in the Netherlands. In 1944 the Nazis urged the actor Kurt Gerron to make a movie about the "wonderful" life in Theresienstadt. The film had the ironic title "*Der Führer schenkt den Juden einen Stadt*" — The Führer gives the Jews a city. The "Ghetto Swingers" had to participate, too. When the film was finished most of the participants were sent to Auschwitz. Here, too music saved Coco's life. "*Die Bilder, die ich in jenen Tagen sah, waren nicht auszuhalten, und doch hielten wir sie aus. Wir spielten Musik dazu, ums nackte Überleben.*" — What I saw was unbelievable and hard to stand. We played music like hell only to survive.

Every time when the SS gave the order they had to play for their amusement, including Swing. The SS had a favorite song – La Paloma. “Desire for freedom”. It was a cynical background for the prisoners who were sent into the Gas chambers. Even today Coco finds it hard talk about this: *“Die Kinder, die an uns vorübergingen, schauten mir direkt in die Augen, ich schaute nicht weg. Sie wussten genau, wohin sie gingen. Diese Bilder sind auf meiner Netzhaut eingebrannt. Ich kann noch so oft blinzeln. Manchmal hilft mir, dass die Tränen kommen, aber kaum öffne ich die Augen, ist das Bild wieder da. Mit ihnen ist in mir endgültig etwas zerbrochen, das nicht zu reparieren ist.”* — The children who passed by looked straight into our eyes. I looked at them. They knew where they had to go. Those pictures are burned into my eyes. Sometimes it helps me that I close my eyes and tears roll, but when I open my eyes, all these pictures here again. Something is broken in me that no longer gets repaired.

In January 1945 Coco came to Dachau near Munich and was liberated by American soldiers. He never spoke a word of his experiences for a long time after. *“Ich jammere nicht, dass ich im KZ war, ich juble, dass ich da rausgekommen bin.”* — I don’t complain that I was in a concentration camp, I rejoice that I came out. He wanted to be recognized as a musician and not as somebody from the concentration camp who is playing a little bit of music.

„Ich bin Musiker. Ein Musiker, der im KZ gesessen hat, kein KZler, der auch ein bisschen Musik macht. Die Lager und die Angst veränderten mein Leben grundsätzlich, aber die Musik hat es geführt, und sie hat es gut gemacht.” — I am a musician who was in a concentration camp, not an imprisoned person, who makes a little music. Those camps and my fear changed my life but music led it and this was good.

His close friend, the saxophone player Karl Heinz Böhm, told me, “I knew a little bit about his life and that he was in a concentration camp. But we never talked about details. All this I only got to know much later.”

After the war Coco looked for opportunities to play his music in the destroyed Berlin. Helmut Zacharias took him in his Band and they recorded some of the first Swing records after the war for the East German Label “Lied der Zeit”, later Amiga. During that time Coco heard Charlie Christian play. He was fascinat-

ed by his sound. Roger Rossmeisl, a famous luthier, told him the secret — the strings were amplified electronically. So Schumann let him rebuild his guitar with parts of headphones that the soldiers from the Wehrmacht used. An electric guitar in Germany at that time was something complete new. On his first recordings with Zacharias he is heard as the first musician in Germany with an electric amplified guitar.

The fact that Post-war Germany was still administered by “old” Nazis still led him to emigrate with his wife Gertrude and her son Peter to Australia at the end of 1950. He started to play in Melbourne with his friend Leo Rosner and his Gypsy Band and recorded his first record under his own name (but in the English version with only one “n” on the Label) Spotlight Varieties “Coco Schumann’s Quintet” and a second one — The Melody Lingers — with the clarinet player Geoff Kitchen. Although he was loved and obtained plenty of work playing, he became homesick. Shortly before he was to get his Australian citizenship he left Australia. His desire for Berlin, his parents and his brother was bigger. So he went back to a country that he never would call his *home* again. *“Heimat’ ist für mich eine zwiespältige Angelegenheit. [...] Ich bin nirgendwo mehr zu Hause.”* — ‘Home’ is a difficult word for me. I am nowhere home any more.”

He now lives in a quiet area of Berlin. A suitcase is always packed under his bed.

His wife died many years ago. Friends often visit. So does his longtime friend and member of his Quartet, Karl Heinz Böhm. “When I phone Coco, I always start joking with, ‘Do I interrupt your practicing?’.” They became known in the 1960s when Coco played in a little Club in Berlin. Meanwhile they tour all over Germany playing the wonderful Swing standards. Especially the very intimate concerts in a little Berlin Jazz club “Badenscher Hof”. A highlight is having old friends looking in. He knows a lot of anecdotes and jokes. The atmosphere is respectful and very social. He can talk for hours about his meetings with Les Paul, Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald or Marlene Dietrich, who was accompanied by his Melody Trio when she performed in the Titania Palace Berlin in 1946. He especially loves ballads, the quiet moments, when he is speaking, with his guitar, to

an appreciative audience.

Armstrong gave him the advice, “Coco, it is not important what you play; it is important how you play.” When he starts to play the intro of one of his most favorite ballads “Autumn Leaves” - the plectrum between his lips while smiling into the audience — and then changes to the chords — these are *the* moments that everybody will remember forever. Coco: “Notes are only pixels on a paper. You can play them, of course. But it is a big difference to awake them to life.”

His life story is of great interest. Hollywood planned to make a movie with Leonardo DiCaprio as Coco. The actor Jeff Goldblum came especially to Berlin to talk about this project but, unfortunately, nothing has yet happened.

Coco never lost his sense of humor. His motto for life was a quotation by Charlie Chaplin: “A day without laughing is a lost day.” “As a Jazz musician I had the great advantage to have a home in my music and to have a family worldwide.” He always talks with fond memories about his life in Australia and is very sad that he never could return.

Text and Photos: Detlef A. Ott

All Quotations are from many talks led by Detlef A. Ott with Coco Schumann and Karl Heinz Böhm

Books: Coco Schumann: Der Ghetto-Swinger.

Charles Lewinsky: Geron Roman Nagel & Kimche, Zürich 2011, ISBN 978-3-312-00478-2

Eine Jazzlegende erzählt. Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag München 1997, ISBN 3-423-24107-1

Films: Coco, der Ghetto-Swinger (1986), Swing under the swastika (1989,) und La paloma adé (1997), “Theresienstadt – Musik als Zuflucht” Dokumentation by Dorothee Binding und Benedict Mirow (2013)



From Berlin to Bonegilla and Back

By Ralph Powell

"My name is Coco Schumann. I come from Germany and I am a musician and music is my life. If I go back to the camp I will be sent to pick fruit and will not be able to play my music and if he could arrange for me to go to a larger city so I can play my music. The minister looked at me and smiled, and said to his secretary, "Write down his name. We'll give you a call in Bonegilla."⁴ When the placement officer informed him he would be sent fruit picking Coco, having had the *chutzpah* to demand that he be treated as a special case, responded, "Sorry, but you must call Mr. Armstrong. He will give you another order."⁵ As a result, in late February, Coco moved to South Yarra to begin working at the IXL Jam Factory in Chapel Street, Prahran.

He endured this for a fortnight before seeking an opportunity to get back into the music scene. Coco takes up the story, "After 14 days, I thought my god, my hands have got

As a Mischling, Heinz Jakob "Coco" Schumann was ill at ease in post war Germany and sought a fresh start in Australia. Having sailed out of Bremerhaven on the Castelbianco on 14 November 1950, Coco, his wife Gertraud and step-son Peter arrived in Melbourne during a summer heatwave. From Station Pier they headed by train to the unlined Nissen Huts of Bonegilla Migrant Reception and Training Centre.

Fortunately for Coco, there were several musicians in the camp who knew him personally or by reputation. Coco describes how, "Joshi, a Hungarian piano player asked me whether

I would like to play in the camp band. What a stupid question! So I stood the very first evening after our arrival on the boards that meant the world to me".²

He also performed at the 1951 Golden Jubilee of Federation celebrations in Canberra to which the musical newcomers from Bonegilla had been invited. "There was ballet, music of all kinds and a kilometre long buffet. It was a grandiose banquet on a well-kept lawn... We stood around in the ice-cold night and drank lots of beer. During our breaks we watched the spectacle."³



Lowell Morris (d) Leo Rosner (pac) Stan Walker (p)



Gertraud, Coco and Peter on board the Castelbianco Dec.1950

"I am a musician and music is my life"

It was on this occasion that Coco's brashness stood him in good stead. The assistant-secretary in the Department of Immigration, Robert Armstrong was at the event – the man responsible for the development of post-arrival services which facilitated the successful settlement of migrants. Under the impression that Mr Armstrong was the Minister for Immigration, Coco approached him saying,

bigger. Two of us had to lift 100 kg sugar bags and empty them into the jam all day long. So I made (fruitless) enquiries with bars, dance halls and coffee lounges."⁶ Consequently, one night, he roped his heavy amplifier to his back, took his guitar and walked down to the Oran Coffee Lounge, in Barkly Street St. Kilda, "the number one address in town". Coco continues, "The man who looked horrified when I came up the steep stairs was the owner himself. I told him that I came from Berlin and that it is a long time ago that I played. I only wanted to sit in a little bit. He asked his musicians who rolled their eyes – a wunderkind from Berlin - that is all what they wanted. But they let me play. They asked me in what key I wished to play the songs. When I answered them that it

Coco Schumann's Australian Sojourn - 17 December 1950 – 30 June 1954

doesn't matter what key, they were amused by the little booster."⁷

The six degrees of separation which seem a feature of his life again occurred. Suddenly the door of the kitchen opened and Walter Jöckel from Terezin Concentration Camp (where Coco had been interned) came out. Walter, who was a fan of Coco's, had been the butcher in the Terezin kitchen. "He had the little, sweet and naïve boy in mind, who made the daily life in Terezin endurable with his guitar playing."⁸ Walter was manager of the Oran Coffee Lounge and asked Coco whether he would like to continue playing that evening. Finally, the owner asked Coco to leave his guitar and invited him to return the following Friday but

singer Peter Kotek. The band often played at Jewish weddings and confirmations and also "travelled half Australia with a Fashion Show."¹¹ In just 6 months the German émigré was being lauded as one of Australia's most outstanding guitar players.¹²

Coco Schumann must be considered among the best of the guitarists playing in Australia today

Keen to get back into the jazz scene, Schumann took every opportunity to play with local musicians. Graeme Bell mentions him amongst the jazz band leaders of the 1950s Melbourne Town Hall Jazz Concerts¹³ and "when the opportunity presented



Lowell Morris (d) Coco Schumann (g)

Coco explained that he was under contract and had to stir jam. "He assured me that he would call the Employment Office the next day!"⁹ as he had a permit to serve food and employ someone in the kitchen. "So he took over my contract and I was hired as kitchen help. And for the next two years I played music."¹⁰

At the Oran Coffee Lounge there was a four piece all-migrant band led by accordionist, Leo Rosner, with Coco on guitar, Stan Walker piano and Lowell Morris on drums. Their repertoire comprised everything from folk songs, Viennese waltzes and Russian dances to modern dance music.

His involvement with Leo Rosner soon led to dance music recordings with "Leo Rosner and his Gipsy Band". Produced by Homecrafts Pty Ltd, the records were singles that included Coco on guitar and baritone

itself to perform at Melbourne's Downbeat Jazz Festival he leapt at it".¹⁴ Schumann performed at the Downbeat Festival for the following three years declaring that, "The atmosphere of those days inspired me to compose and arrange my own songs".¹⁵ In 1953 Coco Schuman's (sic) Quintet released *Rhythm Cocktail* with the band made up of Adriano Smith p, Trevor Torrens sb, Ron Loughhead vb, Charlie Blott d. He also recorded *The Melody Lingers*, with the Geoff Kitchen Quintet on the 'Spotlight' Varieties label.

Both microgroove discs were well reviewed by the newspapers of the day.¹⁶ The 1953 *Downbeat! Big Band Bash* in the Mel-

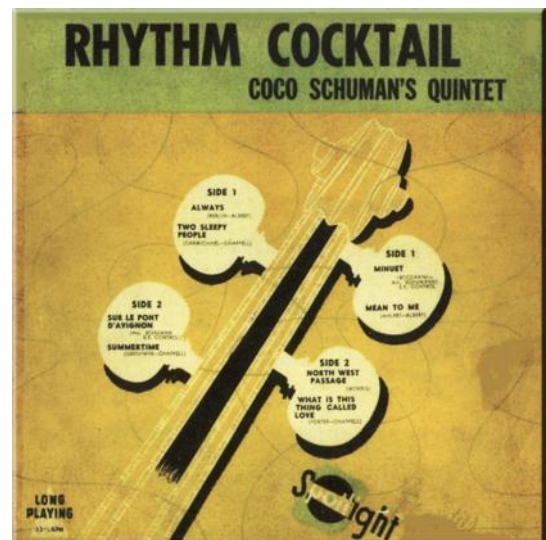


Geoff Kitchen (right)

bourne *Wirth's Olympia* saw Coco performing with the "Jazz at the Phil" Team – an Australian version of the legendary American Session - under the leadership of Lowell Morris.

There was a saying about Melbourne, that it's as big as New York's Central Cemetery and twice as dead.¹⁸

Eventually, the lack of any late night activity, combined with homesickness and a desire to be with his family, led Coco to return to Germany. Melbourne after midnight looked more like a science fiction movie set.



With nobody about, it was nothing like Berlin where a vibrant nightlife existed. The streets were empty, no pubs were open. There was a milk bar at St.Kilda Junction patronised by taxi drivers. Coming out of the Oran late at night he would walk the streets in a vain attempt to unwind but "there was just nothing and I had to go home still on a high." 17

Thus, the June 1954 Downbeat concert, for which he received the princely sum of £6/3/4^d, was his parting performance. Billed as *Farewell to Coco Schumann*, it featured Coco g, Lowell Morris d, Stan Walker p, Lou Silbereisen sb and singer Wally Wood in the line-up. John Sangster and Charlie Blott supported on maracas. A fortnight later he departed for Germany. Leo Rosner's Gypsies were on the wharf to farewell them on 1st July 1954. Standing at the railing of the Toscana, the family waved goodbye

to their friends and "looked forward to uncertain days in the – again - new homeland." 19

ENDNOTES

1. Mischling (crossbreed) was the term used by the Nazis to classify persons of Aryan and Jewish heritage.
2. Schumann, Coco, (1997) *der Ghetto-Swinger: eine Jazzlegende erzählt*, Taschenbuch Verlag, Munich, p.139.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid. p.140.
5. Ibid.
6. Schmitz-Koster, Dorothee, "Kaviar und Wassersuppe : Coco Schumann: Ein deutsches Musikerleben" Radio-Bremen 2, Bremen, 2nd.December 1996, Web. Transcript, p. 16.
7. Schumann, *op. cit.*, p.141.
8. Ibid. p.141.
9. Ibid. p.142.
10. Oikonomakou, Katerina, *Berlin Interviews* <http://berlininter>

views.com/?p=1058 March 4, 2014.

11. Schumann, *op. cit.*, p.143.
12. Tee, Frederick, (1951) "Music For Moderns." *The Listener* In July 21-27.
13. Bell, Graeme. (1988) *Australian Jazzman*, Child & Associates, Frenchs Forest, p. 190.
14. Hurley, Andrew W. *On the Sunny Side of the Street: A 'Ghetto Swinger' in Australia*, Extempore, No. 4, May 2010: p. 106.
15. Schumann, *op. cit.*, p.144.
16. "On the Record" *Argus* 18th April 1953 p. 14.; *The News* (Adelaide) 28th April 1953 p.10.
17. Schmitz-Koster, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
18. Oikonomakou, *op. cit.*
19. Schumann, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

Translations by:

Detlef Ott and Guenter 'Charles' Schaefer

Coco celebrates his 91st birthday in May this year

Leo Rosner & His Gipsy Band



CONTINENTAL RECORDS by HOMECRAFTS

Another new Spot-light Varieties disc we liked is Coco Schumann's quintet's "Rhythm Cock-tail," consisting of ever-greens like Irving Berlin's "Always," Carmichael's "Two Sleepy People," and Gershwin's "Summertime" from "Porgy and Bess."

Dim light . . .

It is just the music to dance to in a dim light, with some interesting arrangements featuring electric guitar, vibraphones, piano, and clarinet. The "Summertime" arrangement for piano and guitar is well worthy hearing. Coco Schumann is also featured guitarist in with Geoff Kitchen's disclet presenting "The Melody Lingers" — including such numbers as "Music, Maestro, Please," "Indian Summer," "September in the Rain," and "The Song is Ended." Within the frequency range they have set themselves, the recording engineers have done a job favorably with most imported popular music discs we've heard so far.

28th April 1953 The News (Adelaide) p10



Coco Schumann	4 3 4	(Paris)
Lowell Morris	4 3 4	(Paris)
Stan Walker (Hawthorn)	4 3 4	(Paris)
Joe Silbereisen (Bell Band)	4 3 4	(Paris)
Wally Wood - Vocalist	4 3 4	(Paris)
(with Sangster & Blott on Maracas)	2 5 0 0	(Paris)

Downbeat accounts for the farewell concert.