

Farewell to a Local Hero

by Aileen Derieg

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Hubert Grillberger, singer and guitarist of the Linz band Austria Knochenschau, died on 13 February, shortly before his 60th birthday. He will be sadly missed.

Hubert was one of the first local celebrities I became acquainted with when I first came to Linz in 1985. He showed up one day at the bar where I had just started working as a waitress, and I was instructed that whenever Hubert came in, I should simply give him coffee and share my cigarettes with him. Those instructions were easy to follow: Hubert, with his lively dark eyes, his long graying hair and his wild beard, was charming. At first I didn't know why he had this special status, why this colorful character was treated with such respect and affectionate admiration by everyone who knew him, but it seemed perfectly appropriate. Then one day, when it was warm outside, I heard music out in the courtyard and stopped to listen. Somehow a guitar had magically appeared, and Hubert was sitting outside playing the guitar and singing. It was some battered old acoustic guitar, it was a melancholy song to be played on an old guitar, but I was mesmerized. The sound of his voice went straight through me. Hubert had a beautiful voice.

After I stopped working as a waitress, moved on to other contexts and other concerns, whenever I happened to run into Hubert somewhere in town, I always felt honored that he still remembered me. He always stopped to greet me warmly and ask for a cigarette, and sharing my cigarettes with Hubert always felt like a privilege. Then one day, when my children were very small, we met Hubert in the waiting room of a doctor's office. He laughed when he heard me speaking English with the boys and began to entertain a pair of surprised toddlers with stories – told delightfully in a mixture of beautiful English and our local dialect – of gigs that he had played in London and all over Europe in the heyday of sex & drugs & rock'n'roll. Hubert was a local hero, a musician from Linz who was talented, gifted, charismatic and good enough to "make it" in the big wide world of music far beyond this province. When the receptionist coolly announced that the doctor was ready to see Mr. Grillberger, Hubert winked at the boys and laughed and started singing "I've got a nickel, you've got a dime, let's get together and buy some dope", as he danced off to go in to see the doctor. The stern matrons in floral-patterned dresses in the waiting room all went rigid with affronted disapproval, but my small children were enchanted, and so was I. After that, my children quickly became some of the youngest fans of Austria Knochenschau with Hubert

and his "electricity guitar".

Was Hubert Grillberger a successful musician? He was certainly important here, as he influenced, inspired and encouraged many younger musicians. I'm not a musician and I never knew him well, but he was someone that I came to care about as a person, as a unique and very special person. Other people, especially musicians, were closer to him and I often heard exchanges about whether Hubert was ok – and sometimes he wasn't. There has never been a lack of people keeping track of the ups and downs of his life, and I think that says much about his importance and the person that he was. Over the course of time, it's not easy to avoid "assimilation" in a tamed society that has come to regard the excesses of passionate music-making as an embarrassing youthful aberration. To me, Hubert was one of the few people I have known who managed to avoid that kind of assimilation, but without becoming dogmatic, bitter or resentful in his resistance. Last night another musician said sadly that Hubert was much too young to die, but he had certainly lived his fifty-nine years to the fullest – he left absolutely nothing out.

Hubert's funeral will be on Tuesday, and messages are circulating now that musicians and others who cared about him will be gathering after the funeral for a "secular" farewell and a tribute to his life. Of course we want to go, but this poses something of a dilemma for us: Tuesday is also my younger son's sixteenth birthday. As I hear my son playing the guitar in the other room now, singing soulful ballads and protest songs that were written long before he was born, it occurs to me that it might be the most appropriate way to celebrate his young life by paying tribute to a musician whose life has ended now – but it is a life will not be forgotten.