

Treading the Line between Operetta, Dance Music, European Avantgarde and American Jazz: Songs and Lyrics of the Threepenny Opera 1928 (Dreigroschenoper) von Kurt Weill and Bert Brecht.

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Abstract

After moving to the United States, composer Kurt Weill was interviewed by American Radio where he recalled his prior image of the New World: "We liked everything we knew about this country. We read Jack London, Hemingway, Dreiser, Dos Passos, we admired Hollywood pictures (...). America was a very romantic country for us". In addition to his classical training in Dessau under Ferruccio Bussoni, where he worked primarily on Mozart, Lortzing and Weber, Weill's own music was influenced by contemporary music, American Jazz and Blues, as well as the operetta and the dance- and popmusic of the era. Swing and Charleston had detached the traditional Waltz from the 19th century. He played with these influences and soon developed his own style which linked all these elements. Even before meeting the Poet Brecht, he had said to his opera buffa 'Der Zar lässt sich fotografieren' (op 21): "In the end, I decided that the only way I could take it to the next level (...) was to complete the tone colour. This led me to add the 'grammophon scene', where a mechanical instrument and dance music became key to driving the action forward. I was only able to spare myself the saxophon and jazz sound for this 'Tango Adèle'", Weill noted in 1927.

Weill, who at this time was keeping up with the latest music in his work as a critic and essayist for a radio station in Berlin, saw jazz imports from America as an enrichment: „The rhythm of our time is jazz, the Americanisation of the entire way we live, which is slowly but surely taking place, finds its strangest expression here.“ Weill raves about the brilliant jazz bands of the 'Negro Revues' and writes polemically of the „miserable, primitive pop music of the pre-war period“ (means the Years before 1914, W.R.), which was completely fading away „against the richness of modulation, the rhythmic and sonorous achievements of jazz.“ (Weill 1927, Berliner Rundfunk)

The theory began to take shape in early 1928 when Brecht and Weill were commissioned to rewrite John Gay's 'Beggar's Opera' for a German audience. The idea was to contrast what was happening on stage (the strange and curious life from gangsters, criminals, sluts and outcasts) with „new“ music, with sloped melodies and sounds never heard before.

Kurt Weill proved a suitable candidate for this project, combining elements of modern e-music (right down to twelve-tone-music) with popular elements of American jazz and ragtime (songs, blue notes, chromatic chord movements). To this end, he tried out various unusual band arrangements: Wind instruments, trumpets, saxophones, percussion, timpani, banjo, piano, as most evident in the 'Moritat' from Mackie Messer (Ballad of Mack the Knife). This Song was a typical example of how Brecht and Weill juxtaposed

the music and action on stage: Macheach comes across on stage as sweet gigolo under the gallows, while admitting his dastardly deeds in a song accompanied by a kind of 'funky faiground music' carried by barrel organ. A tragic circus number!

Weill orchestrated the song as follows: the first two stanzas accompanied by harmonium, then the winds, banjo, and piano joined in, followed by the saxophones and drums at the end, eventually turning the song into an elegant foxtrot.

The popular musical was very successful and often sold out in the 'Theater am Schiffbauerdamm' and was played ensuite over one year. Two years later the musical was filmed under the direction of Georg Wilhelm Pabst and even came to be shown in the United States.

After the 'Threepenny Opera', Weill would go on to use instrumentation drawn from jazz and popular music in the following musical „Happy End“, a project that was unsuccessful and abandoned after just a few performances. For it's stand-our song „Surabaya Johnny“, composed for only the singer and piano, the tempo is marked 'very quiet blues' and moves between E flat major und C minor. Despite the failure of this alternative Christmas fairy tale, there was still a happy ending for Kurt Weill, first with the Play Mahagonny, then later in Hollywoods movie scene..

Keywords: Lindberghflug, Threepenny opera, Mahagonny, Ultimate modernity

While in the metropolitan milieu of Germany the radical change in the entertainment sector - away from the European musical culture of operettas and waltzes and towards the popular music of modern America, namely jazz and jive - can already be seen shortly before the First World War (Ritzel 1999: 'Epochal Turning Point'), media development is picking up speed thanks to the new distribution channels via records, sheet music, gramophone (from 1923 also by radio), and is advancing the history of mass media at a rapid pace. Looking at the USA was paramount, because this is where the technical innovations, new popular music (swing, jazz), revealing fashion dances (Charleston, Jive) and fun movies (Buster Keaton) originated. In the 1920s, 'Americanism' became the 'key to unconditional and ultimate modernity.' (Peukert 1987: 79)

1. 'Americanism', enthusiasm for America

Popular culture from America set the pace: Comedian Harmonists sang songs by the American vocal group The Revelers, while combos in the Berlin and Hamburg dance halls changed their program in the mid-1920s to add to their repertoire the latest and most popular swing and jive hits from overseas. The force of the new sounds is largely confirmed by the irate reactions of conservative musicology experts, as well as in the polemical and helpless reviews of the conservative to right-wing conservative press, which fiercely fought against hot jazz and related phenomena. Jazz was indeed described as 'the unmusical production of savages, as uncultivated Negro music' (Rumpf 2013: 18), which has nothing to do with European dance music and cultural tradition, i.e. waltzes and operettas. Concerns were raised against the unrestrained Afro- American dance style (for example: Josephine Baker and her 'Revue Negre'), against the sexualisation of performance, against the 'wild' jazz harmony and against the permissiveness of gender roles in modern ballroom dances imported from the USA - all of them clichés and denunciations that soon became part of the more sharply formulated anti- jazz argumentation of Nazi ideology. The jazz of those early years, as critically noted by Berlin pop music expert Siegfried Schmidt-Joos, was labelled as 'shady, negroid, exotic' (Schmidt-Joos 2004: 363); fans, however, literally absorbed it as the modern sound of progress and departure from the constraints of the post-monarchical era: 'The frenzy of pleasure that broke out in Germany after the lost war and seized all classes was voiced and driven by American rhythms. The Charleston has long been the most popular dance; with its exuberant leg acrobatics, which shook the whole body, favouring the erotic revelation.' (Glaser/Koch 2006: 52)

The progressive and innovative artists of Germany's avant-garde, such as Kurt Weill and Bert Brecht, looked accordingly enthusiastically across the Atlantic to America. The country had just risen to become a world power, presented itself as the 'Land of the Free', and also made a name for itself with its expansive economic policy, modern metropolitan architecture (Chicago, New York), rapid highways, Ford's car factories and technical innovations (electrification, entertainment industry), but no less so through sound movies or 'talkies', Hollywood movie industry, swing and jazz.

This promising side, which the USA supposedly radiated, also stimulated Brecht, who first moved from provincial Augsburg to the metropolis of Berlin (then with 4.2 million inhabitants). The poet, writes Brecht biographer Klaus Völker, 'was looking for a different reality, he confronted Augsburg with the big city, Germany with America (...). America became the positive counter-image, became the pioneering country with technical progress and professional opportunities for the young.' (Völker 1976: 66).

Brecht liked Charlie Chaplin's films (Gold Rush, Modern Times) and was interested in boxing, especially the (white) American heavy-weight boxer and champion Jack Dempsey. On 29 October 1927, he visited the 'Night of the Berlin Sports Press' in the Ufa-Palast am Zoo to watch the premiere of the original film of the Dempsey/Tuney fight, with the slow-motion recording of the famous 7th round. (Hecht 1997: 238 f.) Boxers also liked to appear in his plays, the set of Mahagonny in Baden-Baden in 1927 was a boxing ring; during his visits to boxing rings, Brecht also came into contact with the German heavyweight champion Paul Samson-Körner, with whom together the later famous 'boxer photo' was taken.

Brecht read newspaper articles about figureheads of modern and pre-modern US capitalism, about the railroad king Dan Drew or Cornelius Vanderbilt (1794-1877), who first operated shipping lines, then entered the railroad business and speculated on the stock exchange. Henry Ford's 'Philosophy of Work' (1925), to which Brecht refers several times in his writings with the term 'Fordism', was held in his library too. He also encourages Elisabeth Hauptmann and Emil Burri to write the radio play 'Conversations with Henry Ford. The history of the automobile', which will be broadcasted in 1931. (Brecht Schriften 1929: 709).

The US architecture also sets standards that impress Brecht. 'A supplement of sorts (to the book 'Geist und Face des Bolshevismus' WR) is Mendelssohn's 'America', an architect's picture book, excellent photos, all of which can actually be pinned to the wall individually, and which give the (certainly deceptive) impression that big cities were indeed habitable.' (Brecht Schriften ebd. 1926/27: 176)

The young snob was also impressed with fashion: 'I saw the only possible shape for shoes on an American brand. Her name was 'Vera' and was she was really the one.' (Brecht *ibid.* 1929: 301) And further: 'The only thing that these (American WR) cities previously produced as art was fun: Charlie Chaplin's films and jazz. Of these, jazz is the only theatre that I can see.' (Brecht *ibid.* 1926: 188)

The composer Kurt Weill, whom Brecht had met at the Baden-Baden Music Festival in 1927, later recalled while emigrating in front of an American radio microphone: 'We loved everything we learned about this country. We read Jack London, Hemingway, Dreiser, Dos Passos, we admired the Hollywood films (...) To us, America seemed to be an extremely romantic country.' (Quotation from Schebera 2000: 76) In addition to his classical training in Dessau under Ferruccio Busoni, where he worked primarily on Mozart, Lortzing, and Weber, Weill's music was influenced by contemporary music, American jazz and blues, as well as the operetta and pop music of the era. He played with these influences and soon developed his own style which linked such elements. Even before meeting Brecht, he had said of his opera buffa 'Der Zar lässt sich fotografieren' (op. 21): 'In the end, I decided that the only way I could take it to the next level (...) was to completely change the tone colour. This led me to add the gramophone scene, where a mechanical instrument and dance music became key to driving the action forward. I only managed to spare myself the saxophone and jazz sound for this 'Tango Adèle'. (Schebera 2000: 51 f. Quoted from Weill: *Gesammelte Schriften* 1927)

Weill, who at the time was keeping up with the latest music in his work as a critic and essayist for radio, saw jazz imports from America as an enrichment: 'The rhythm of our time is jazz. The Americanisation of the entire way we live, which is slowly but surely taking place, finds its strangest expression here.' Weill raves about the brilliant jazz bands of the 'Negro revues' and writes polemically of the 'miserable, primitive pop music of the pre-war period', which was completely fading away 'against the richness of modulation, the rhythmic and sonorous achievements of jazz'. (Metzger 1998 *ibid.* Quoted from *Der Berliner Rundfunk*)

2. Breaks: distance, criticism, ambivalence, defence

While Weill refined his mix of styles and retained his positive image of America, Brecht began to mix up different insights from 1926 onwards: although he was still enthusiastic about free America (cinema, sports, architecture, fashion), he met the American writer Ferdinand Reyher in Berlin, who sent him his piece 'Don't bet on Fights' (Boxer), and offered him to advertise the distribution of his works in the USA, but at the same time anticipates the shortcomings of the promised land: Brecht reads Upton Sinclair's novel 'The Jungle' (1905), which appears in German in 1924, and which denounces the unreasonable conditions in the Chicago slaughterhouses and the machinations of the meat industry. This bitter balance leads to further research (in terms of the Chicago Stock Exchange and modern mass production) and the plan for a trilogy entitled 'Asphalt Jungle' (working title 1926: History of the Flood. The rise and fall of big cities), which should also include a chapter entitled 'Cold Chicago'. These preliminary considerations later lead to the play 'Saint Joan of the Stockyards' (1931)

In his diaries, Brecht notes with unmistakable irony in the best books of 1926 that 'Myers' story of the great American fortunes is a feast for lovers of criminology.' Brecht *Schriften* 1926: 27). The critical intellectuals of that time debate not only about jazz and America, but also about Marxist theory, socialism, Lenin's Soviet Union, new progressive forms of literature and musical theatre. In doing so, the dark side of capitalism comes to the fore, insights that will initially lead Brecht and others to an ambivalent attitude towards America, then to a radical change in attitude.

When Brecht was planning a play with the polemical title 'Joe Fleischhacker' about speculation on the stock exchange in Chicago, he read up on the subject of economics, consistently came across Karl Marx's *Capital*, researched the history of the stock exchange and the financial manipulation there in 1926; as a result, he started keeping his distance with the 'promised land', and suddenly, nearly overnight, moved to praise the (communist) Soviet Union 'as the country of the future' (Völker 1976: 127). According to Völker, his image of man is also changing accordingly: 'The great buildings of the city of New York and the great electricity inventions alone fail to increase mankind's feeling of triumph. Because, more important than them, a new type of person is emerging now, precisely now, and the entire interest of the world is directed towards his development.' (Völker *ibid.* : 132) Völker thinks that from this point on, Brecht's image of individual fate and heroic drama shifts, and the playwright starts thinking in collective (socialist) patterns from now on. My objection: both attitudes are still constantly mixed; Brecht's theatre cannot do without leading figures (Macheath, Pirate Jenny, etc.), with a tragic heroine leading through the story in 'Saint Johanna'.

1928: Threepenny Opera

At the beginning of 1928, Brecht and Kurt Weill, whom he had come to know and appreciate a year earlier for the first version of the short songspiel 'Mahagonny', produced for the German Chamber Music Festival in Baden-Baden, were commissioned to re-write and germanise the English piece 'Beggars Opera' by John Gay. The inspiration for this came from Elisabeth Hauptmann (German-American writer from Brecht's environment), who heard about the play's resounding success in the English press and translated it into German. For this purpose, Brecht

imagined a different sort of music than the existing one, a new kind of avant-garde music that he called 'Misuk' and that should radically counteract the action on stage. Kurt Weill proved a suitable candidate for this project, combining elements of modern serious music (right down to twelve-tone music) with popular elements of American jazz and ragtime (songs, blue notes, chromatic chord movements). To this end, he tried out various unusual band arrangements: wind instruments, trumpets, saxophones, percussion, timpani, banjo, piano, etc. This was best understood in the Moritat of Mackie Messer, the later world hit, covered by Ella Fitzgerald, Bobby Darin, Sting and many others. This song was a typical example of how the duo Brecht and Weill juxtaposed the music and action on stage. Macheath comes across on stage as sweet gigolo, while admitting his dastardly deeds in a song accompanied by a kind of funky fairground music accompanied by barrel organ. There were also other distortions: 'When the songs came, the author had the stage darkened, old-fashioned kerosene lamps dangled down from the drawing floor, and in the background a (rotating) mock organ was visible, with musicians sitting in front of it.' (Völker 1976: 142)

The Threepenny Opera was a popular success during the 1928 winter season at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin, and continued to run for over a year. This was in stark contrast to the mostly unkind reviews, where critics on both left and right found the alternative 'opera' too jumbled, too unpolitical, or too popular. Regardless, Weill's found his special musical style, which was to be continued in Lindberghflug and Mahagonny. The singspiel 'Happy End' performed in between (and cancelled after a few performances) also contains great Weill songs such as 'Surabaya Johnny.'

1929: The Lindberghflug

Summer 1929. Baden-Baden Music Days. The 'Lindberghflug', sometimes called 'Der Flug der Lindberghs', was meant to be a musical audio image/experiment live with radio broadcast, speaker, orchestra and text. The main theme of the festival was 'Radio art for the masses in the technical age', and so Brecht calls the work a 'radio lesson for boys and girls.'

'The audience in the hall and listeners in the production should be shown as a model of how Brecht and his employees envisaged participation of radio listeners, and how art and the technical medium could be used for educational purposes, so that the radio could achieve a 'progressive' social function.' (Arnold 1973: 133) An 'original music for the radio' was requested. Weill is one of those who envisioned such 'commercial music' (we shall not refer to the endless discussions among composers active at the time on the subject of 'commercial music'). In his opinion, the crisis of new music could be overcome with this attempt to popularise and thus democratise modern serious music. Outside the concert hall, innovative forms should be tried out, especially for the new broadcasting medium.

In 1927, Charles Lindbergh was said to be the first solo flight (unaccompanied) to fly across the Atlantic from New York to Paris in 33 hours. Upon his feat, he collected the \$25,000 prize money and became a celebrity of aviation and modern technology. Thousands of people were waiting for him on the runway in Paris, and on his return in New York he was greeted like a war hero with a confetti parade. Shortly afterwards, the good-looking, smart sports pilot published the book 'We' (we two, meaning he and his 'Spirit of St. Louis'), on which Brecht relied.

Thesis: Brecht seems to have thought that with this current topic (worldwide media publicity, 'Man of the Year' in 'Time Magazine' 1927) he could particularly appeal to young people (target group of the radio experiment), and could reconsider or deconstruct his hitherto quite positive image of America, which was already faltering due to his studies of Marx's work. He describes the event from different angles. Besides the plane, there is the fog, the sleep, a blizzard, etc. Paul Hindemith composed the musical descriptions of nature in the late Romantic Expressionist style, Weill wrote the songs that illustrated the aviator's emotional instability, thus the 'American' part. In the first version of the text, Lindbergh is still presented as a hero, portrayed as a figure of the 'American dream', as a star of technology, as a lonely hero with (ancient) drama and

hero potential. Man and machine overcoming the forces of nature. However, Brecht's attempt to use role-splitting (orchestra, speaker, text, radio) in radio staging to achieve distortion effects and thus to dismantle the hero myth failed despite all theoretical considerations. The work sounds disparate, wavering, the experimental arrangement seems extremely complicated and had little effect on the audience and listeners. Despite its nationwide broadcast, the response to this 20 minute strange minutes was by no means unanimous and rather modest. Brecht, who understood the 'audience participation as a prerequisite for the creation of an art act', was disappointed. Today, the ambitious audio image, the 'radio tutorial for boys and girls' is considered a well-intentioned but unsuccessful radio experiment from the pioneering days of radio. (Rumpf 2008: 46 ff.)

Regardless, Brecht admired the American aviator. In his work journal, in fact, he criticises the lack of courage of German pilots, who shortly before abandoned their attempt despite having an intact aircraft: 'In view of the fiasco of the German ocean flight, there is a risk that insufficient attention is drawn towards the public condemnation of the cowardice shown by a few pilots. (...) But I don't think we should put off any attempts to cross the ocean.' (Völker *ibid.* : 228)

As far as radio production is concerned, Brecht admits errors: he reflects on the dilemma he has with radio as a new medium and the Lindbergh production, in his challenge to transform the radio from a distribution into a communication device. (This short discourse, often incorrectly referred to as 'radio theory', is only mentioned in passing.)

Mahagonny is a fictional city in present-day North America. Once again, the story takes place in the demimonde. The opera is based on a 20-minute singspiel that the Brecht/Weill team designed for the Baden-Baden Music Festival in 1927. Weill wrote to the music publisher beforehand that 'an exciting plot, a completely new style of opera with hits and revue scenes' (Hecht: 240) was to be expected. Elsewhere, he describes a 'musical arc of images.' (Pike: 282)

Similar to the Threepenny Opera, Weill put together a band/orchestra of 16 wind instruments, percussion, banjo, bandoneon and piano. In the instrumental passages and the songs, he ironically refers to baroque, operetta and opera (Bachfuge, Paul Lincke, Carl Maria von Weber, Wagner's Tristan chord), and combines them with elements of European and American popular music: Schrammel music, marches, shanties, blues, and swing. For Theodor W. Adorno, it was the 'first surrealist opera' (Drew 1975: 63), on which he was quite enthusiastic:

'The Alabama song is actually one of the strangest pieces in Mahagonny, and nowhere does the music suit the archaic power of the memory of the former and lost chants recognized in miserable melody scripts as in this song, whose stupid repetitions in the introduction aptly introduce the realm of dementia. If the satanic kitsch of the nineteenth century, Seemannslos and the prayer of a virgin are conscientiously quoted and paraphrased, this is no daring literary joke but establishes a borderline position of music that cuts through those regions without naming them, and that only pronounces the name in caesuras, which no longer has power over it.' (Drew *ibid.* : 65 f.) According to Adorno's abstract praise of Weill's mix of styles, the modern media coup that accompanied the Mahagonny premiere a year and a half later in Berlin seems downright trend-setting: attendees received for free 'one of the first picture records made in Germany with two songs from the opera in instrumental dance arrangements' (Hecht *ibid.* : 314); actors had finally reached the present of media modernity. 60 performances followed.

3. Disillusionment vs. Identity change: Brecht and the FBI, Weill as the Broadway star.

As Kurt Weill (as a German Jew) emigrated to the USA with his wife Lotte Lenya as early as 1935, composed film music for Fritz Lang in Hollywood and wrote for musicals on Broadway (hits like 'Lady in the Dark', 'Lost in the Stars', 'September Song', 'Youkali', 'Foolish Heart', 'Lonely House', 'Speak low' come from this successful phase and again show his affinity for US entertainment and jazz), he was also assimilated as a person and became a New American. Weill no longer feels like
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someone from Dessau or Berlin but as an American: 'The Nazis clearly did not call me a German composer, and I left their country in 1933. I am an American citizen, during my twelve years in this country I composed exclusively for the American stage,' he wrote in a letter to the editor of 'Life' in 1947. (Wikipedia Kurt Weill 12/13): He has actually been an American citizen since 1943 and never returned to Germany.

Brecht followed in 1941 and landed on the sunny side, in California, but also travelled several times to New York, where Weill lived. Both continue to have contact with German artists, but we ignore whether they met in New York at some point.

Brecht seeks contact with the film industry in Hollywood and co-wrote the screenplay for 'Hangmen also die' for Fritz Lang; Weill contributed music tracks for Lang's film 'You and me' in 1938. The contact between both emigrants was broken, especially since Brecht had found another congenial composer in Los Angeles for his pieces, namely Hanns Eisler, who had also emigrated.

But current history leaves its mark: under the impression of the atomic bombs being dropped in Japan in 1945, Brecht translated into English an American, new version of the 'Life of Galileo Galilei' (previously written while emigrating in Denmark), in which the scientist is portrayed in a much more negative way, and planned a stage version with Charles Laughton in the lead role. Since he is writing a lyric version of the Communist Manifesto ('Das Manifest') at the same time, he is now being targeted by the FBI, which considers him a foreign agitator and taps his phone: 'According to FBI's director John Edgar Hoover, Brecht is again (sic!) suspected of being a spy; he, therefore, orders a technical surveillance, which is confirmed on 18 April 1945 and registered under 'symbol BB-L'. In fact, the FBI had been practicing telephone surveillance since May 1943.' (Pike: 750)

On 30 July 1947, the American Galileo version was premiered in a small off-theatre, the Coronet Theatre in Beverly Hills. Less than two months later, Brecht receives a summons from the Committee of Unamerican Activities and is asked about his membership to a Communist Party. His answer, in clumsy English: 'I was and am not a member of any Communist Party. (...) I was an independent writer and wanted to be an independent writer (...) and I think, theoretically, too, it was best for me not to join any party'; this statement is broadcast on the radio and is still available in the German Broadcasting Archive today. (Pike: 795)

For the successful playwright and émigré in the 'Land of the Free', this summons and the mistrust that was placed upon him severely tarnished his image of America. After this performance, which was perceived as humiliation, Brecht left his place in the USA; one day later, he travels via Paris to Switzerland, later to East Berlin, and becomes not a German but an Austrian citizen.

In 1950, the year Weill died in New York, Brecht's bitterness towards America was expressed, among other things, by his submission of a revised text version for a radio play production by SDR/Stuttgart. In this version, he completely eliminates the title 'Lindberghflug' and anonymises the hero. It is now only called 'Der Flieger' or 'My name is irrelevant here'. He also renames the piece 'Ocean Flight'. Schachtsiek-Freitag interpreted this politically and as a result of his change as a theatre man in the 1973 Brecht II volume 'Text and Criticism': 'With the elimination of the name, any memory that an individual was the protagonist of the didactic play in the early version is completely erased.' (Schachtsiek-Freitag 1973: 135).

However, further indications lead in a different direction: in a letter to the Stuttgart broadcaster, Brecht criticizes Lindbergh's role in the Third Reich and in the USA. He is said to have had private contacts in Munich and 'close ties to Nazis' and 'played a very dark role as a fascist' in the USA. (Hecht *ibid.* : 902) Most recently, this anti-Lindbergh reaction was probably a final reflex on his bitter experience with the FBI in the USA.

It turns out that Brecht's former positive image of America from the early 1920s has now completely disintegrated, while his congenial partner Weill remains in the country as a successful and satisfied New American until his death in 1950.

While the Lindbergh or Ocean Flight was no longer performed and has also disappeared from the archives as a radio play (1950), the Threepenny Opera and Mahagonny are still part of the repertoire of German musical theatres today.

4. Weill goes Pop and Jazz: The Doors 1967, 'Lost in the Stars' 1985.

Interestingly enough, there are still quite a few Weill's echoes in the pop and jazz scene. 1967 - Possibly at the wrong time for an up-and-coming successful rock band, the Doors (lead Jim Morrison) interpret the 'Alabama Song'. The song (from Mahagonny) was premiered in Baden-Baden in 1927, the first recording with Lotte Lenya came on the market three years later, another followed in 1955 in the USA under the title 'Berlin Theatre Songs'.

The explanation for this Brecht/Weill renaissance is provided by the Austro-Hungarian writer and director George Tabori, who lived in Los Angeles from 1948. He wrote screenplays for Hollywood and was in contact with Brecht and Feuchtwanger, Aldous Huxley, and Greta Garbo. Tabori was a name familiar to film student and poet Jim Morrison in Los Angeles, largely because the curious rock poet was particularly interested in the German film aesthetics of the 1920s (Metropolis), and the progressive music of the time (Weill). In addition, Morrison had taken courses on film history with director Josef von Sternberg (The Blue Angel), who also landed in Los Angeles. In his mid-twenties, Morrison saw himself as a multi-media artist, composed songs, wrote lyrics, wrote 'movie poems' and essays, and dealt (like Bob Dylan) with the English poet and painter William Blake (1757-1827), who as a spiritual and religious romantic in his day remained an unpredictable outsider. Incidentally, Morrison had also imported the band name from Europe; it comes from Aldous Huxley's (1894-1963) novel 'The Doors of Perception', a popular reading at the time especially among drug users and people who dreamed of expanding consciousness and a different America. Comparable at best with Hermann Hesse's 'Steppenwolf' and Harry Haller's visit to the Magical Theatre, which many hippies read as a drug trip. With the Alabama song, the Doors departed from their image of the 'Light-my-Fire' hit rock band, and ventured into the field of art music. Keyboardist Ray Manzarek underlines the experimental character of the song with a staccato-like organ accompaniment and various sound games on the 'Marxophon'. The Doors no longer sound like Rock'n'Roll, but rather like a weird fairground band from the Weill's Balkans. Morrison mixes apocalyptic mood and a longing for death as he declaims:

“I tell you we must die I tell you we must die
I tell you, I tell you, I tell you we must die.”

At the end, when the moon is howling over Alabama and the song soars to a hymn-like chorus, the central motif is repeated:

“Oh, Moon of Alabama, we now must say goodbye
We've lost our good old mama,
and must have whisky and you know why.”

David Bowie, who in his self-discovery years in Berlin (1977-1980) flirted with Marlene Dietrich and the glamorous scene and cool aesthetics of the 1920s, took the song with him on his 1978 world tour for the album 'Heroes'. On the cover of the single, Bowie is also dressed in Brecht style (with a cap and black leather jacket); in 1980, the song appears on the single 'Ashes to Ashes' released in Germany; on Bowie's Sound & Vision tour ten years later, the Alabama song - a faithful companion - resurfaces 60 years after the premiere.

Celebrities from jazz and pop came together in 1985, again 35 years after Weill's death, for the project 'Lost in the Stars - The Music of Kurt Weill'. So, the genius from Dessau was by no means forgotten. With Sting, John Zorn, Carla Bley and Phil Woods, Dagmar Krause and Tom Waits, Charlie Haden and Aaron Neville. They celebrated songs from 'Happy End', the

'Threepenny Opera', 'One touch of Venus', 'Mahagonny' and 'Johnny Johnson' in a very special way. The most popular one, performed hauntingly by Lou Reed in a raw and at the same time casual manner, was the 'September Song' from the musical 'Knickerbocker Holiday' from 1938. Weill, known also - and sometimes feared - for daring harmony sequences, consciously composed an easy song because the musical actor and singer Walter Huston lacked a broad vocal range; Weill drew from his own repertoire, and the song was based on material of his unknown remaining operetta 'Der Kuhhandel' from 1935.

The month of September symbolises autumn (of life), the older singer advises the younger lover not to waste much more time. The song became popular through the musical and the subsequent film and found new performers in Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Sarah Vaughan and Liberace; Woody Allen finally brought it back to the cinema in 1987 in his romantic media satire 'Radio Days'.

The most interesting version, which transposes the song into an initially unfamiliar context, comes from someone who is not initially associated with Kurt Weill because he belonged to the New York rock avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s: Velvet underground's rough lead Lou Reed. He had participated in the New York project 'Lost in the Stars' - 'The Music of Kurt Weill'.

Lou Reed, who came from a Jewish family in Brooklyn, actually wrote heavier blues and rather rough rock songs. In 1965, he and the Welsh cellist John Cale founded the Andy Warhol-sponsored pre-punk band Velvet Underground, in which he played guitar and sang now and then. The formation achieved its first success with rough and unusually arranged songs due to the cello, which were contrasted with the childlike voice of the German model Nico (Päffgen) from Cologne. Andy Warhol contributed the famous banana cover for the LP record; the weird avant-garde project was a success because the uncouth style in a certain way anticipated the British and American punk of the 1970s.

One reason for turning to Weill and his 'September Song' could have been Reed's friendship with the Jewish literary scholar Delmore Schwartz, with whom Reed, who later never really wanted to lose his intellectual connections, had studied English literature from 1960. Reed wrote songs like 'My House' and 'European Sun' for him, so there was that renewed connection to the culture of the old world. After his time in the Factory and Velvet Underground, free-thinker Reed embarked on a solo career, with the album 'Transformer' (1972) produced by David Bowie and Mick Ronson, of which the hit song 'Walk on the wild Side' became an international radio success; still today, the song with the ironic backstage scenes about cover girls and the saxophone solo towards the end is a classic of glam rock. This was followed by his dark album 'Berlin' in 1973, which deals with suicide, junkies and the oppressive atmosphere in this city. His connection to the avant-garde art scene in New York, to Fluxus and the surprising action theatre was never severed, and he also had a long history of drug abuse. Decades of drug and alcohol consumption cost him his life in 2013, indeed, as he was 71 years old.

While Sarah Vaughan's 'September Song' sounds like elegant nightclub blues, Lou Reed covers it with the gritty patina of dirty rock'n'roll, with the overpowering electric guitar. His version has a lyrical intro in which he talks about himself as a young man:

‘As the time came around, she came my way
As time came around, she came.
For it's a long, long while, from May to December
And the days grow short, when you reach September.’

Reed sings the song cool and, as usual, a little out of tune and, above all, gets to the heart of his own life situation at the age of 50. He has seen and experienced a lot, psychiatry and drug trouble, the Factory and the artists' New York; he knows what September (= autumn) means, and when the autumn of life begins, namely right now, it is best to enjoy in good company:

“These golden days,
I'd like to spend them with you”

Lou Reed can sing about himself in this old Weill song, and other artists in the 'Lost in the Stars' project also formulate a deep bow to the immigrant Jewish American from Germany, who knew very sad moments (Tom Waits, Charlie Haden and Sharon Freeman). Even today, again 35 years later, an homage worth listening to, which incidentally - in contrast to Brecht's failure in the USA - shows the other way: America can sometimes be the land of unlimited possibilities. This is proven by these Weill songs, which have left an impression in several generations and can certainly make a few claims on the jukebox of eternity.’

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