

SOUND AND SMOKE

A Brief Survey of the Weimar Berlin Cabaret Era

By Tom Garretson, producer



If one reads the current literature on the history of the Weimar period, and in particular the history of the Weimar Berlin cabaret era (1918-1933), one is left with two seemingly opposing views on the subject. On one hand, we have the rather dry, academic approach, sans of all flavor and colorful description, and at best is only a historical outline of the established theatres, revues, cabarets, composers and performers presenting conventional entertainment. This view tends to leave out the sub-cultural influences, the gritty underworld climate of the cellars and dark pubs where many of the intelligentsia and artists gathered. In the other view of the period, we have a romanticized longing for the torrid dark cellars of Berlin, filled

with opium smoke, transvestite chorus girls, hot jazz and barons with suspect incomes and perverse tastes. This ignores the wider cultural scope. I am rather inclined to believe that the climate of Weimar Berlin's cabarets was somewhere in between -- and more. Much, much more. To even begin to understand the popular cabaret music of Weimar Berlin, you must also understand the culture it was created in as a whole.

We have the film and musical *Cabaret* to thank for the popular view of the period, showing us decadent underworld patrons engulfed in a hazy cloud of sexual transgression, with some great songs thrown in for good measure. Based on the Christopher Isherwood novels published in his *The Berlin Stories*, it brought us Isherwood's experience of the events from 1929 up to 1933, however filtered through Hollywood's imagination. Also, *The Threepenny Opera*, having a huge success on Broadway in the late 1950's, resulted in a revival of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's works, especially in America. Strangely enough, their names became entangled with the popular definition of Berlin cabaret, even though neither Brecht nor Weill, for example, wrote specifically for the cabaret stage. To really get at the zeitgeist (the "spirit of the times") is perhaps impossible for those of us born too late to have experienced it, but through research and interviews we are able to obtain at best, a glimpse of the atmosphere that was Weimar Berlin between the wars. If any serious investigation of Weimar culture, especially the music, is to succeed, then one must embrace not only musicological research but the historical, the sociological, the political, and delve into the many forms of the arts: theatre, painting, architecture, film, photography, literature, poetry ...and so much more. One needs to inflame the senses with the great magnitude of creativity that the Weimar Renaissance period gave us.

Berlin at the turn of the century was a bustling, growing metropolis that rivaled Paris as a focal point of the arts. Evolving from the industrial evolution and into the machine age, Berlin's inhabitants were drawn not

only from all over Germany, but the city could count émigrés from such countries as Russia, France, Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Holland, Austria, and Switzerland. Already well steeped in a history of political turmoil, radical thinkers, and revolutionary spirit, the city grew from 1,300,000 in 1880 to over 4,000,000 by 1925. Horse drawn carts filled with produce from the countryside vied with electric streetcars on its avenues, and pedestrians dodged the new motorcars just beginning to be seen. Consumerism grew with the new shopping arcades and grand department stores such as the Wertheim or the Kadewe, truly spectacular shopping experiences. Silent movie theatres and revue theatres displayed colorful neon marquees that seduced the passerby. The latest fashions and fleeting crazes could all be seen in the heart of the modernized Berlin.



In 1918, Berlin became the capital of the first German republic, and its government became known as Weimar Germany (after the assembly that adopted its constitution had met in Weimar). So began a period of rampant inflation, unemployment, social upheaval, and rather more ominously, the rise of Adolph Hitler. The reparation payments as outlined in The Treaty of Versailles caused huge resentment in the populace and its politicians, and the blundering attempts to defy it led to a rapid devaluation of the Deutsch Mark. By mid-1923, millionaires were becoming paupers overnight, and a life's savings would not even purchase a loaf of bread. Money was literally carried by the wheelbarrow full. Banker's wives, daughters and grandmothers (and sometimes their sons) could be seen selling their bodies on the Unter den Linden Avenue. Prostitution soared. This indirectly created a revolution in sexual morals – why should a bride hold her chastity until marriage when her dowry was worthless? The old rigid attitudes of conservative sexuality quickly began to fall away.



Berlin prostitutes ca. 1923.



Children playing with worthless banknotes during the devaluation of the mark.

The brutal assassination in Berlin of such figures as the Spartacus League's Rosa Luxemburg in 1919, and the country's foreign minister Walther Rathenau in 1922, led to a great deal of turmoil and uprising. By the end of 1922 there had been at least 400 political assassinations, most of these by right wing groups. Huge demonstrations by leftist worker's organizations were met by the right wing opposition, and the Freikorps, those paramilitary right-wing organizations which eventually paved way to the SA and SS, attacked many who disagreed with their vision of the new Germany.

Impromptu demonstrations abounded, and clashes with the police led to senseless murders of innocent bystanders. It is with little wonder that the events of these years found itself as topics and commentary in the songs of the Berlin cabarets, presented and performed with the idiosyncratic dark Berlin wit.

Into this dynamic whirlwind of social change the industrial revolution began to transform into the technological revolution. This not only made its impact on daily life, but also greatly vitalized the arts. American silent films were big draws in Berlin, more so after the German faltering film company UFA was financially saved by Hollywood investors. This gave American films greater distribution in Germany (both Weill and Brecht loved American films, and were often at the cinema – influencing their operatic masterpiece Mahagonny). Many German films were also made during this period, such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligary*, *Metropolis*, “M”, *Pandora’s Box*, *The Blue Angel*, *Nosferatu*, and many more, are today considered classic masterpieces of the genre. Recording technology progressed from wax rolls to vinyl discs, making the popular songs recorded by cabaret stars widely available. Radio was introduced,



leading to music being distributed into homes. The machine age had begun, artfully announced by the neon and lighted marquees of the revues and the cabarets, and embraced in the work of Berlin’s artists and writers. Away from the old, towards the new! The mechanics of the cinema, trains, airplanes, and factories were portrayed onstage in the revues and cabarets, either in metaphors or as stage design. Best known are Erwin Piscator’s bold stage designs for his productions in cabarets and theaters, which included such new technicalities as films and newsreels to convey mass events.

Blaring loudspeakers, flashing lights, air-raid sirens and more effects helped create his vision of a “total theatre” conveying radical political instruction.

The Weimar Renaissance was truly a rebirth of the creative spirit, deriving much its energy from the reactions of the First World War. This is exemplified in the drawings and sketches of George Grosz, for example, whose disfigured veterans, gluttonous bankers, prostitutes and criminals, drunks and capitalists, and horrors of war were presented with a brazenness not seen before in the arts. Many more artists began to investigate the darker sides of society, both in painting, literature and in music, while others looked to the future, the new, to redefine creative boundaries. Walter Gropius, (“A world has been destroyed; we must seek a radical solution.”) formed the Bauhaus school of design and arts, and its cultural and aesthetic impact is still being felt today. Dada certainly had its influence as well. Walter Mehring returned from Switzerland



Erwin Piscator, cabaret and theatrical revolutionary.

espousing Dada’s merits, and you could find phonetic poems being read at the Café Austria. Expressionism flowered and quickly died, transformed perhaps, to be replaced by Modernism and the “neue sachlichkeit” – the new objectivity. Everywhere in Germany, and especially more so in Berlin, one could feel the new vibrancy in all the arts. Literature, poetry, film, painting, opera and theatre, all broke new ground, and with shocking affirmation.



Nowhere were the results of this turmoil presented with such flair and satire as in the songs of the Berlin cabarets and revues. By 1918 when the Weimar Republic officially was formed, the Berlin cabaret scene was flourishing. Smaller cabarets began

to open catering to all tastes and forms of entertainment, appealing to every economic status, ethnicity and sexual preference. From the very beginning, ethnic influences of all kinds helped create the style and flavor of the cabaret's line-up. Hungarian, Russian, Gypsy, and even French influences and styles were thrown into the musical melting pot. When the first black Americans performed in Berlin (the Original Dixieland Jazzband toured Europe in 1918, and Paul Whiteman's Orchestra toured in 1920), this had a profound effect on many performers and composers. Jazz and black entertainers from the United States made such an impact that the Germans coined a word for it, "Amerikanismus". The Chocolate Kiddies troupe performed at Haller's Adminralpalast in 1925, featuring mu-



by Duke Ellington to sold out audiences, and Josephine Baker appeared Nelson's theater in that same year, wowing the city with her banana skirt dance. These performers were sensational hits, and Germans became fascinated by the blend of sophistication and what they saw was "jungle primitivism". Syncopated rhythms began to replace the influence of Viennese waltzes, and German critics as well as composers were engulfed in the swamp of jungle-pagan jazz dances, however misguided their romantic interpretations of black American culture were. Composers such as Friedrich Hollaender and Mischa Spoliansky whole-heartedly threw themselves into early jazz music, and the Weintraubs Syncopators were certainly the hottest German orchestra in town. Even Kurt Weill made jazz a part of his compositional style.

Likewise, Jewish culture was strongly represented in so many of the composers and performers, many of whom came from Jewish backgrounds such as Kurt Geron, Paul Morgan, Rosa Valetti and Curt Bois. Yiddish theater tradition as well as Klezmer influences found their way into the music and performance style of the Berlin cabarets, with its ethnic tonalities becoming a part of many songs. Indeed, when Hitler established his ban of Jewish performers on the stages of Berlin and Germany in 1933, critics exclaimed in worry that there would be no music at all. At any rate, the music which was allowed to be performed after the ban was not worth attending, as audiences clearly demonstrated by staying away in droves.



So, what could we experience if we went back in time, to the various cabarets of Berlin during the Weimar years? In the earliest pre-Weimar revues and variety shows such as Wolzogen's Motley Theater, popular songs, acrobats, animal acts, magicians, dancers and skits were on the bill. As cabaret evolved, the staging became more and more lavish, with extravagant tableaux and costume numbers dominating, as were performed at such larger revue venues as the Metropol or the Wintergarten. In the Weimar years, Haller's Revue (seating between two and three thousand) was the home for the renowned -and hotly debated- Tiller Girls, those dancing girls in militaristic costume and in marching lines – provoking many other cabaret performers to parody them in skits and musical numbers. Charell's Revue also vied with the other revue theaters to utilize the latest technology and glitzy numbers. Typical line up of acts included a Master of Ceremonies, tableau numbers with scantily clad chorus girls, popular singers performing satirical numbers, dance acts, chorus lines, and lots of glamour and sparkle. Dinner could be brought to your table, and many venues had a dance floor in front of the stage.



The Haller Revue chorus girls, performing in a more grecian mode.

These larger spectacles were the home of many popular cabaret stars, such as the openly lesbian Claire Waldoff, who mesmerized everyone with her “in-your-face” delivery of songs and gritty, guttural voice. Other star performers included Curt Bois, who charmed his audiences with his slightly nasal rendition of

“Guck Doch Nicht Immer Nach Dem Tangogeiger Hin” tango, and most certainly was an influence on the film Cabaret’s Joel Grey for his role; Trude Hesterberg, who started her own cabaret in the basement of the Theater des Westens, called Wilde Bühne (Wild Stage); Margo Lion, with her strikingly stick-like figure who enchanted the lesbians of Weimar together with Marlene Dietrich, in the song “When My Best Girlfriend”; Rosa Valetti, who managed the Meglomania cabaret and who also appeared in the original stage production of The Threepenny Opera; Veleska Gert, the dancer who performed her “autobiographical dances” and often parodied fads



The Tiller Girls!

such as the Tiller Girls (she most likely would be considered a performance artist today); Paul Graetz, singing in his aggressive Berlin dialect, who sang Kurt Tucholsky’s biting satirical songs in the Schall und Rauch cabaret; Blandine Ebinger with her childish phrasing and girlish voice, wife of the composer Friedrich Hollaender; Kate Köhl, possessing a more classically-trained voice; and of course, Marlene Dietrich, although this was far before she was to become the sultry sex goddess of the 1930’s.



Trude Hesterberg

The style of singing, we must remember, was in a time when the majority of performers did not have microphones for amplification. Listening to many of the singers today, for the most part, we can hear a more declamatory style of singing, stemming from their need to be heard over the orchestra, as well as conveying the lyrical content

directly to the audience in front of them. These were, after all, songs meant to be understood, to be communicated to the listener. A more theatrical style was called for, and good enunciation was essential. The singers sang out to their audiences, making one feel that the performer was directly singing to you.

Composers and writers such as Rudolf Nelson, Friedrich Hollaender, Mischa Spoliansky (who was the house composer for Hesterberg’s Wilde Bühne cabaret in 1923), Marcel-



Claire Waldoff



Blandine Ebinger



Marlene Dietrich in "The Blue Angel"

provided Spoliansky his breakthrough. Smaller cabarets, often located in the pubs or cellars of buildings, would provide renditions of popular songs from the larger theatrical productions, or present variety smaller scale shows with the usual sarcasm and satire. Even songs from Weill and Brecht's Mahagonny or Threepenny Opera, fully-staged opera and theater productions, became hits in the cabarets, with orchestras performing



Rudolf Nelson

them in fox-trot arrangements. "Threepenny Potpourri", "Alabama Song", and "Berlin im Licht" were rewritten by other arrangers, all personally approval by Weill. One could simply not walk into a café, a cabaret or dance hall without hearing these dance numbers,

or even a rendition of "Yes, We Have No Bananas", certainly the biggest pop song of its day. The Cabaret of the Nameless featured singers and performers with no talent whatsoever who performed to laughter and derision by the audience, much to the chagrin of the newspaper editorials decrying its shameful treatment of the idiots performing. The Haus Vaterland provided its international clientele a "Department Store of Restaurants" which was in reality five different

venues housed under one roof, and could serve 6,000 diners in its Rheinterrasse, the Palmensaal, the Türkisches Café, a Viennese café called the Grinzing, the Spanische Bodega, and the Wild-West Bar. Altogether you could view big-name variety acts and the Vaterland-Girls (24 girls), 12 bands and 50 separate cabaret numbers in one evening. At the Kakadu you could dance first and then catch the show, which usually consisted of non-political comic sketches, an acrobatic dancer, a sailor dance, and a jazz orchestra. The Resi provided female-only and male-only orchestras on opposing landings, and boasted 86,000 electric lighting fixtures and whirling mirrored globes. The Rio Rita Bar provided a more intimate locale, with a blind pianist leading a highly regarded jazz orchestra, playing the latest popular songs and tangos. Opium and cocaine could be purchased there. And at the Stork's Nest Cabaret (said to have been the



Mischa Spoliansky with cabaret performers.

lus Schiffer, Walter Mendelssohn, the brilliant satirist Kurt Tucholsky (alias Theobald Tiger), Werner Richard Heyman and Siegwart Ehrlich established their reputations in such cabaret revues, and many went on to also write for smaller cabarets or even establish cabarets of their own (such as Hollaender's Tingtangle cabaret in 1931). The cabarets and revues existed in all sizes and formats. Max Reinhardt's Grosses Schauspielhaus with its Schall und Rauch cabaret in the cellar (among other places) parodied literature and poetry, as well as sacred composers such as Wagner. His Komödie cabaret staged the important show Es liegt in der Luft (It's in the Air), which



Marcellus Schiffer, Rudolf Nelson, Friedrich Hollaender





Es liegt in der Luft cast



The Spanish Bodega at the Haus Vaterland was a cabaret with a latin flavor.



Customers using the table phones at the Resi Cabaret



At the Red Mill Cabaret you might get more than a fly in your beer.



James Klein Revue nude dancer



Margo Lion and Claire Waldoff



Masked customers at the Wiese Maus cabaret, waiting for Anita Berber



The Winter Garden featured extravagantly luxurious productions



Es liegt in der Luft program



Dancer Anita Berber, the "inflation era high priestess" as portrayed by Otto Dix.

model for the cabaret in *The Blue Angel*), the stage featured a semi-circle of chairs facing the audience, where all the performers sit and take turns replacing the last entertainer who performed. Steins of beer were then sent up to the chanteuses when they had completed their number by audience members. The cabarets were quickly created, with each striving to outdo each other in some eccentric theme or décor, and many quickly folded.

Girlkultur of interest? Certainly nude dancing could be seen on the stage in certain venues and cabarets, and in the back alley cabarets, even more could be revealed for the right price. James Klein in his *James-Klein Revue* was noted for his portraying nudity onstage under such titles as *Alles nackt* (Everyone's Naked) or *Donnerwetter – 1000 nackte Frauen!* (Goddam – 1000 Naked Women!), and one critic referred to Klein's productions as "a pornographic magazine come alive". At the Theater des Westens or the Komische Oper you could view



tableaus of artfully arranged naked women in staged giant flowers or feathered fans. Not so "sophisticated" entertainment could be found elsewhere. At the *Weisse Maus* cabaret patrons wore black masks (those who did not want to be recognized), and the enchantress of the inflation era Anita Berber danced her erotic, if often drunken and vulgar, dances on the



floor. If harangued she would dance naked on your table, and perhaps even urinate on it as well. In the early 1920's during the economic crisis, sex cabarets were easily found. Marlene Dietrich de-



The Hohenzoffern Cafe featured a male cabaret for lesbians only.



"Ladies" of the Eldorado

scribes going to one of these with her husband and some friends. Tables circled the room in a horseshoe fashion, and while the audience sipped cocktails and viewed proceedings through a peephole in the wall by their table, they could view a prostitute and her unsuspecting client providing the evening's entertainment. The client turned out to be a friend of Dietrich's, set



up by her and her friends, and one can only wonder how he reacted the next day when told of this by her. The established theaters and cabaret revues certainly had their competition. However scandalized, fascinated

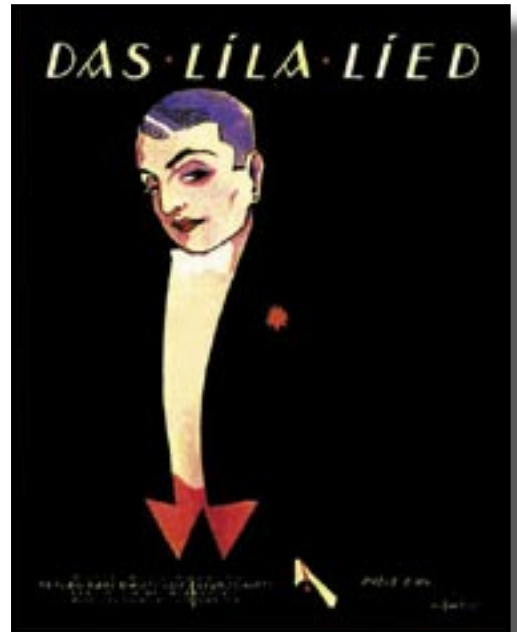


Max Mensing, singer of "Süßer...Süßer"

or intrigued Berlin citizens were of the new permissiveness, it certainly helped sell tickets.

Sexuality, in all its forms, was a huge part of the vitality of cabaret in Berlin. It was the subject of many songs, and even from the beginning, was presented in either innuendo or in blatant lyrics. No subject was too precious, too taboo. The pre-Kinsey work of Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, a forerunner and pioneer of sex therapy (labeled the "Einstein of Sex"), helped to open the eyes of the German public to the vast variation of the sexual arena. He is even the subject of a cabaret song recorded in 1908 by Otto Reutter, entitled "Der Hirschfeld kommt". Hirschfeld was often parodied and referred to by many a cabaret performer, and his work provided an ever increasing list of sexual topics for artists.

Cabaret stars could now sing about Sado-Masochism, sexual deviance, hermaphrodites, lesbian girlfriends, kleptomania and even the odd lust mord or two. In the earliest pre-Weimar years of the century, the singer Dolorosa recited erotic poetry and sang her sadomasochistic verses in many pub-cabarets such as the Zum hungrigen Pegasus (the Hungry Pegasus), finally making her way the Silver Punchbowl to sing "The Song of Songs of Pain and Torture", which ultimately resulted in a crackdown by the police censors. Anything that was considered to offend public morals, political or religious sensibilities, was heavily censored by the authorities in the pre-Weimar years. After 1918 this changed, when Weimar Germany abolished preliminary censorship, and no stage performance required prior inspection or approval. The Berlin cabarets and revues took advantage of the lax laws and especially the lack of funding for policing, and ushered in an era of lyrical content and the nude review. Eventually, the censorship laws were again used heavily against the Agitprop ("agitation propaganda") troupes and by 1931 were being actively used to stop inflammatory political cabaret.

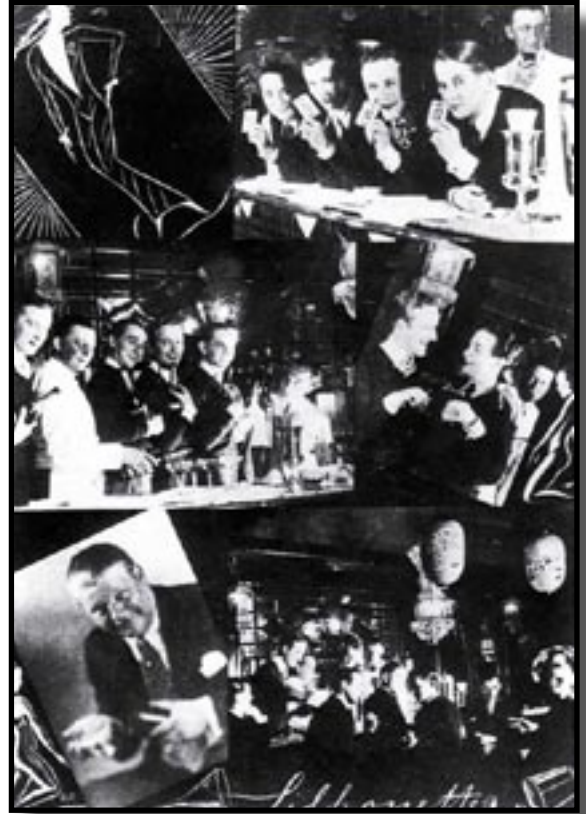


Homosexual and lesbian bars and cabarets in Berlin were varied and many, and some were renowned even throughout Europe. All of these had in varying degrees, forms of cabaret, either in staged shows or a simple piano set up on the premises for singers to accompany. The Eldorado was one colorful venue where tourists were recommended by the guidebooks of the day to pop in to see men dressed as women, something to tell the folks at home about. The gay life could be found openly flourishing at the Cabaret of the Spider, the Alexander Palast or the Adonis Lounge. There, you might see a drag chorus perform with a male tenor, perhaps even do a version of the popular hit Süßer...Süßer (as we have included on the CD – complete with drag queen chorus). There also were





many recordings that were by released gay performers, specifically geared towards the gay market. In fact, Weimar Berlin was one of the few cities in Europe where gay people could live openly. "Das Lila Lied", also presented on this CD, was written by Kurt Schwabach and Mischa Spoliansky (under the pseudonym of "Arno Billing"), was an early militant anthem for gay rights. There were drag venues at the Silhouette, the Mikado and the Monocle-Bar, all being closed by the Nazi's in 1933. The Café Dorian Gray, the Hohenzoffern-Café, the Toppkeller or the Verona-Lounge featured a specifically lesbian clientele, and there was no shortage of cellar cabarets for those who fell somewhere in between.



Political satire had always been a large part of the cabaret repertoire, but after 1924 this became even more pronounced. Piscator's Proletarian Theatre, however short lived, could offer political cabaret for those seeking consciousness-raising entertainment, and you could also see theatrical displays of decadent capitalism in his Rote Rummel Revue (Red Riot Revue). The Young Communists started the Agitprop Group under Maxim Vallentin, turning topics of social crisis into political entertainment. You not only could receive politically correct entertainment in pubs, cabarets and theater, but you might



be lucky (or unlucky, as many factory workers complained) to have a group appear at the factory you worked at during your lunch break, to spread leftist political education in song and theater. These were usually performed with smaller ensembles, such as singers accompanied by accordion, guitar, or an available piano. The lyrics usually were topical of current events, perhaps even the day's newspaper headlines. Hans Eisler might even be seen accompanying on the piano. His Lied des Händlers (Supply and Demand) with lyric by Brecht, sarcastically exclaims, "I've no idea what a man is, I only know his price!"

All together, these varied types of cabaret and revue shows comprise of what we know as cabaret of the Weimar Berlin era. So many of its numerous writers, performers, composers have not received the recognition they truly deserve today, and there is a wealth of material waiting to be rediscovered by a current generation of performers. Intelligence, wit, sarcasm and warmth are to be found in its lyrics, and its music for its time was artfully progressive and masterly, drawing on so many influences to create a genre that is unique, beautiful and full of irony and vibrancy.

In 1933, Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany, and by March the Reichstag elections gave the Na-



zi's an overwhelming victory (although not given the majority vote in Berlin). By April 1st a boycott of Jewish businesses began, and a ban on Jews performing on German stages. Anyone not adhering to Nazi party policy was removed, or "eliminated". All critical cabaret was suppressed. Even though Hitler and the Nazi's were often subjects of satirical, humorous songs, many of the performers did not take the Nazi threat seriously enough. The Nazi authorities demanded complete depoliticalization of the cabarets, and those who would not comply were dealt with severely. Almost overnight, the Nazi's wiped out the numerous creative performers, composers, writers and artists that together created the Weimar Berlin cabaret era. The lucky ones escaped abroad to find work in Paris, London or Hollywood. Too many did not escape, and were interned in concentration camps, never to return. The Berlin cabaret era had ended. A few of the cabaret artists and performers who were transported to concentration camps were forced, either by the Nazi's or by sheer desire for survival, to perform there in cabarets staged by themselves. In Westerbork, Holland, Erich Ziegler, Max Ehrlich and Camilla Spira performed in six revues between July 1943 and June 1944. At Dachau, Paul Morgan and Fritz Grünbaum were imprisoned. These performers, placed in concentration camps because of their art, ethnic background or sexuality by the Nazi's, saw their captors in the audience, applauding for them as they performed. Certainly this irony was not lost on them. Perhaps the sarcastic irony which Berlin cabaret was famous for had not perished after all, however gruesome their conditions had become.

An essay such as this can in no way do justice to the memory of those who contributed to the Weimar Berlin cabaret era. The composers, the singers, the writers and their works whose names have almost been forgotten, now truly deserve a renewed interest. There is a wealth of material waiting for the modern performer, and an entire world waiting to be discovered by anyone willing to invest the time. We hope that Sound and Smoke: the music of the Weimar Berlin Cabaret Era will help infect you with the zeitgeist of Berlin in that most magical of times, and lead you to make discoveries of your own.

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| Kabarett der Komiker | |
| Kulturhaus 100 | |
| Neue Mischung | |
| Die grosse Premiere | |
| 4 ^{te} Nachm. — Halbe Preise | |
| Angeleitete | |
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| Babe Egan | |
| Hollywood Redheads | |
| Erich Wolfgang von Schiplowsky | |
| 4 Fayre Sisters | |
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