

TØNDER ROAD... DON RICARDO'S REPORT FROM THE HIGH RHINE... SEPTEMBER 2015

We knew the drive up to the Tønder Festival in Denmark would take a couple of days, and Edith booked a decent hotel for the first night in Göttingen, (The “ø” is pronounced “ue,” like the German “ö”) a town north of Kassel. Arriving in late afternoon, we took a walk to shake the kinks out, passing the city cemetery where we could just see over a stone wall, a shaded area with large trees and gravel walkways. Coming to a separate section at the far end, we could see that these were Jewish graves, tombstones with the Star of David, many of them leaning and overgrown. We wondered if the families who were buried there had perished in the Nazi times, and no one was left to keep them up. Or if city authorities had left them as they were, a kind of silent reminder. At the far side we saw graves of a different design, some of them new, which we guessed to be Turkish, or Moslem.

We drove as far as Flensburg the next day, by the Baltic Sea and close to the Danish border. As an unexpected treat, we found a fleet of old, refurbished ships in the harbor; yachts, fishing and work boats, and a couple of steam powered tugs. A kind of working marine museum, all were painstakingly restored, some of them even available for charter.

Crossing into Denmark the next morning, only a European Union sign—the circle of stars on a blue field—marked the border. The road signs changed, and we saw no more in German. We had left the hills behind, and the country looked like the Netherlands, flat and marshy, with patches of forest. We found Tønder, a town about the size of our town of Diessenhofen. I played solo that night at a venue called the Visemøllen, a mill building dating from 1590.

Pressure was off Friday, with only a rehearsal for the Townes Van Zandt tribute show the following evening, an event organized by Hans Theessink. We could hear music pouring out from all over town Saturday; from the festival grounds, and every bar and restaurant, from the motel rooms where musicians were practicing. I could hear Chris Smither singing “Lungs,” a song he would perform later that evening.

The Townes show went on Saturday at the main stage under an enormous circus tent. We sat in a semi-circle with Chris on the left, then Butch Hancock, Hans Theessink, J.T. Van Zandt, me, Mary Gauthier, and on the far right, her violin—and viola—player, Michele Gazich. Standing at the back, Butch’s son Rory played electric guitar. The place was full, with about three-thousand people seated and a standing crowd outside the tent. Hans began with a short introduction, followed by a rousing version of “White Freightliner Blues.” We traded verses, singing the first verse each time around as a chorus. I was “Bad news from Houston...” I took the next turn, singing “Come Tomorrow,” followed by J.T. doing “The Tower Song.” Hans sang “Marie” and Butch did “Waiting Round to Die.” When my turn came around again I played “Dollar Bill Blues.”

The lights went out when Chris was singing, and for an instant I thought it was a trick done for effect. People in the audience pulled out cigarette lighters and small flashlights. Pinpoints of flickering light, they looked like stars out there. Mary took her turn accompanied by Michele’s eerie violin, with a haunting version of “Nothing.” Word came that we were to stop and go backstage while the technicians tried to figure out the problem. “No, let’s keep going,” said J.T.: “Hell, we can play in the dark!” A murmur of assent arose from the stage and the crowd, and we continued. I sang “Don’t You Take it Too Bad,” and J.T. followed with “If I Needed You,” probably the emotional high point of the evening. For my last song I played “Two Girls,” showcasing Townes’ goofy surrealism with unforgettable lines like “*Beaumont’s full of penguins, and I’m playing it by ear.*”

We never lost the sound. The lights came back on sometime towards the end. We played another round of “White Freightliner Blues,” and the crowd rose up with a roar. I heard later there

was hardly a dry eye in the place. “That was Townes,” someone said with a wink, “Come back to mess with the lights.”

I first met Butch Hancock in 1972, the year of the first Kerrville Folk Festival, the summer I moved to Nashville. I met Hans and his wife Milica at a later festival, and again when she booked the State of the Heart band in Austria and Croatia in the early 1990s. I’ve known Townes’ son, J.T. since he was in junior high school. I met Mary Gauthier through my friend Thomm Jutz who played guitar with her after he moved to Nashville. I had never met Chris Smither before, but I had listened to his music. Nor Michele Gazich, a soulful man from Italy, near Milan. In conversation we learned that he also tours with Eric Andersen, and in fact was on his way to play with him after the Tønder Festival. (Another old friend of Townes, Eric would have fit right in).

I played again on Sunday night, at the finale after John Prine’s show, strumming along with English folksinger, Allan Taylor (who I first met in Piran, Slovenia around 1995 on a tour with Sergio Webb), who led the sing-along of “Will the Circle be Unbroken.” Later Hans and I sat up jamming in a backstage trailer with a couple of Irish guys from one of the traditional bands at the festival.

If I sometimes feel challenged playing solo, I like to remind myself that some of the names we cherish in this business are not known for their guitar playing—Cash, Billie Joe Shaver, Kris Kristofferson come to mind. I was a little nervous at my show Thursday. Perhaps it was too quiet in the old mill. There was plenty of crowd noise Monday night at the staff party when I kicked off blowing train-whistle harmonica and singing “Wabash Cannonball.” A thunderstorm beat a tattoo of rain on the tent, and water began trickling, then running in a stream, underneath. People in rubber boots stomped to the music in the mud puddles. We stayed for a set by Hans, and made our goodbyes. One of the drivers took us back to our motel. I don’t know how long the party went on. It was quiet with nobody around the next morning when we loaded up the car for the drive back to Switzerland. We brought back lots of memories from Tønder, one of the coolest festivals I’ve had the pleasure to be a part of.

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In the last letter I mentioned the refugees streaming into Europe. I don’t know how many people in America are following this historic event. The authorities have no idea who the people are pouring over the borders. The European Union issues directives, but lacks the power to enforce policy among the member states. (Swiss voters have never passed a referendum to even *discuss* joining the EU). The talk shows are full of experts, but no one knows what will happen. Updates come almost hourly. I don’t watch television much, and I’ve never figured out what reality-TV is supposed to be. But this must be pretty close.

I’ve been closing out these letters with a plea to all to support Independent Art and Music. I think most people on the mailing list will be familiar with at least some of the artists I was honored to share the stage with up in Denmark. Buy their music—you won’t be disappointed.

Richard J. Dobson

Diessenhofen am Rhein, 15 September 2015

www.richard-j-dobson.ch ... Books and records: www.mytexasmusic.com ... www.amazon.com