

## DON RICARDO'S REPORT FROM THE HIGH RHINE... JANUARY 20, 2014

It took us awhile settling into our regular routines after the holidays. We're underway now, settling into the New Year. Edith has been watching the grandkids and enjoying watching them grow. They call me Grandpa and the youngest one, Simon, says I'm "The Best." Grandpa has been working on a new song, trying to crack the code and bring in the first one of 2014.

I enjoyed an interview with Walter Studer, chief of Radio Munot in Schaffhausen earlier this month. Conducted in English and *Schweizertutch*, he kept me on my toes with insightful questions. I had to answer and trust to luck how it might come out in translation. One in particular caught my attention. "You are living here in this little town on the Rhine and writing about your experiences. How do you think of your audience? Who is the person you think of when you are writing your books?"

"I think of someone who likes travel literature, and also someone who likes music. I believe there is a market out there."

Punctuating our conversation, Walter played cuts from *Here in the Garden*, our Brambus Records release from last summer. Had time permitted, I might have mentioned Mark Twain's *A Tramp Abroad*; or Francis Mayes' *Under a Tuscan Sun*, about an American writer and her husband who buy and restore an old villa in Italy. Another, Peter Mayle's hilarious *A Year in Provence*, is the tale of an English couple who moves into a 200-year-old stone farmhouse in the south of France. I had taken these books as my models, as a kind of template for my book *Pleasures of the High Rhine*. No one, so far as I knew, had ever written an expatriate account of living in this corner of Europe. I sensed opportunity, that I might as well be the one to do it.

As a songwriter, my other target reader would be someone acquainted with, or predisposed to liking my kind of music, especially music from Texas, and the scene I came out of. I included the subtitle, *A Texas Singer in Exile* with this in mind. I was aiming for an audience of people who liked travel and music generally—not only Texas—but I don't believe I thought much more about it until Walter hit me with his follow-up question: "Or, are you just writing for yourself, for your own pleasure?"

"I've always believed there is an audience. I still do.... But maybe you're right," I said. "It may be at the end of the day, I'm writing to please myself."

This was my third or fourth interview with Walter, and the first where we've talked about the books. Thinking about his question about writing to please myself, I decided it ought not to be confused with selfishness. It's not about stroking the ego—something you need when you're younger, but a distraction at this stage of the game—it's about carrying on a life of creative endeavor, the natural expression of your soul.

There's another consideration we didn't get into: I'm looking down the road at 72-years, allegedly (ha) a time of diminishing mental power. Whether songs or prose, writing is the best way I know to keep my brain active. With this in mind, I took down a book that had been sitting in plain sight for years, called *How to Write a Damn Good Novel*. Written by James N. Frey, it wastes no time in setting out the requirements involved. This may not be for me, I thought, but I

figured it merited a closer look. Unlike a memoir or travel book, a novel demands rigorous advance planning. For starters you need strong characters, a story, and a premise; you have to render these characters into believable people and take them step by step through conflict, climax, and resolution. Hard work awaits the writer at the front end of a novel, before you even think of beginning that first memorable paragraph.

It was enough to make me think I'd be better off fishing—and I nearly chickened out, but for the glimpse of a face-saving tactic. This job is simply too much: why not make someone else do it? I figured Frey's target audience would be a guy just out of college, full of fire and ambition to become a novelist. This would take place in the mid 1980s, around the time the book was published. (While the principles remain rock solid, all of my self-help writing books are charmingly out of date, with references to typewriters and word-processors). Why not create this character and make *him* go into the jungle, fight all the battles, and come back with the diamonds? Indeed.

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The Swiss are gearing up for another referendum next month. All the issues put up for vote last November were defeated: the tax deduction for stay-at-home mothers, and a proposal to increase the Autobahn sticker from 40 to 100 Francs. As expected, the One-to-Twelve Initiative, in which a company CEO could not earn more than twelve-times the salary of the lowest-paid worker, also failed to pass. (One can imagine the howls of protest if such an idea were ever broached in American politics). A referendum next month to propose quotas on immigration from European Union members is drawing spirited debate on the evening talk shows. Switzerland is mostly straight up and down, with limited space to live and no place to expand. While the foreign population here is about ten-percent, the jail population is overwhelmingly foreign. Many citizens feel resentment, while pro-growth business interests favor more European integration. Democracy at work, Swiss style, I hope to report back on this and other referendums coming up.

Looking to return to the States in the spring, some dates are already up on my website. See you down the road.

(RIP to two old friends: Long time Austin music deejay Larry Monroe; Steven Fromholz, legendary Texas troubadour).

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