

## Flake

### It's the World's Birthday Today

### Heute hat die Welt Geburtstag

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It's 4 pm. A man is sitting in a windowless room. He is not sure which city he is in right now, is it Paris, Rome or Erkner? And why he is sitting here? He doesn't have enough muscles to be a sportsman, so he must be a musician waiting to go on stage. The band he plays in might be called Rammstein, but might not, because by tomorrow there will be different musicians sitting here. The man thinks about his life and is amazed. Certain things have happened that some would describe as strange and beautiful, others as just loud. He has been making music with this band called Rammstein for twenty years. There really is enough to think about.

*“Flake is one of the very, very few German global super stars”*

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Translated by Tim Mohr

And then there was another new band. I couldn't keep track of them all anymore. Almost every musician I knew played in several bands at the same time, and the various combinations of musicians were all wildly different from one another.

I was guilty of the same thing, I tried to play in every new band that popped up. Some nights it happened that we'd play in several different bands in the course of one concert. The newest one was always the most exciting one. Whenever the other guys in my band threw together another combo I was always excited to hear them, but I was also jealous. Why hadn't they asked me to join?

When Paul started working with Die Firma—that is, the band called Die Firma, not the Stasi, which was also referred to as Die Firma, or The Company—I liked their music so much that I went to as many of their concerts as I could, even though I wasn't in the band. I just loved listening to them. I was like a male groupie. It was apparently possible without sex, too. The most important thing was a spot in the band's van. Or in some other car heading to the show. The band's whole approach was different. The things that we considered important were of no interest to anyone anymore. Nobody wanted to hear my silly noodling. If I wanted to be part of it I'd have to play darker stuff, and with real feeling—which was even more difficult for me. It was exactly the same when I started a new band with two other people—Paul came to see as many of the concerts as he could. He actually ended up playing in that band after I quit.

And now there was another new band, and Paul hadn't told me about this one. I only figured it out because of a note left on our door of the apartment he and I shared. It said something about a rehearsal, and beneath the note was a doodle of an airplane crashing. I pulled the note off the door and read it carefully. Then I left it on the kitchen table for Paul. Now I had to figure out who he was playing with. Maybe he'd get picked up for rehearsal. Aha, it was Schneider. He was our drummer in Feeling B. I hadn't seen him in a while.

If I was being honest with myself, I would have to admit that Feeling B didn't really exist anymore. We hadn't written any new songs in a long time, and only played occasional gigs in front of our old fans when we needed a bit of money. Of course, I didn't want to admit any of that at the time and began to worry about the fact that two of the members were busying themselves putting together a new band.

Apparently two other people from Schwerin—a couple hours north of Berlin—were also involved. And they wanted to make really hard music. At this stage we were listening to a lot of Pantera and Ministry whenever we drove around. That was because we always went to shows with Schneider and as the driver he got to choose the music, obviously. It was a style of music I had a hard time warming up to at first. But I liked the repetitive snippets of sound that people called “samples.” I'd bought myself a sampler for Feeling B at some point so I could play more modern sounding music—with my old toy-Casio from the 80s I might as well not have been on stage. Though I always went on stage anyway. But a sampler seemed to me to be a serious, modern device. It was the kind of thing cool new bands used.

Then came the day when I was invited to come to a rehearsal. I was totally intimidated. There were five bad-assed looking men standing around in the darkened room. Even Paul looked different. I hadn't been part of such an intense and focused rehearsal for years. Or more accurately, ever. To my surprise, an old friend of ours from Schwerin was supposed to be the singer. We'd always liked visiting him, only back then he'd been the drummer in a kind of goofy band. Paul had played with them, too. I really liked Till as a drummer despite the fact—or maybe because of it—that he didn't seem like a proper drummer. I think he'd gotten into it the same way I had: he saw all these new bands popping up and noticed that women were into musicians, and so he wanted to be a part of the whole thing. He was the walking incarnation of punk music.

He'd decided to take up drums because they suited him best. Rather than depending on refined technique he brought enthusiasm and an unusual power. It was a feast for the eyes. And when his band gave their encore, he stood up and started singing. That song, the one they used as their encore, was particularly

good, and you could hear what a great voice Till had. It was easily the band's best song.

And now the guys wanted to start a band with him as singer. Actually not only did they want to—they already had. And I hadn't caught wind of it. I couldn't dispel the thought that they had purposely not told me. There was some truth to that, too. But now I was with them in the basement, trying to make a good impression. At first nobody asked me what I thought of the songs. But if they had asked me, I would have answered that I was totally blown away. The songs were absolutely perfect. I'd never heard guitar riffs like that, and even though I wasn't usually into this type of music, these songs really struck a chord in me. Even though I was a bit older than most of the people this music seemed to speak so powerfully to, I was immediately struck by what these guys were doing. And Till's voice touched my heart—it didn't even matter what he was singing. Some of the first songs were in English but I didn't even notice.

As young people grow into adults, it's often some trivial twist of fate that can both lead them to a certain type of music and determine the direction of their lives. And this music seemed to have been made to get you on your feet and carry you through life. The shock of its impact was as extreme as finding true love a second time.

When I was young and coming into my own as an adult while playing in Feeling B, I'd been deeply happy and fulfilled. I ran excitedly to rehearsals every day regardless of what we were doing. And most of the time we just sat around and drank. But I told everyone about my band, and it was clear to me already then that there was nothing else I wanted to do in life. Both from a musical and personal standpoint. I loved every mile of the endless, bumpy roads that took us to our concerts, and I happily breathed in the stench of stale beer when we arrived at a two-bit venue in some god-forsaken village. As long as I was with the band, I didn't need anybody else around me. I never gave the slightest thought as to whether I was doing the right thing or whether I was happy. And now, years later, at a time when I'd never expected to find that sensation again, here it was. I couldn't believe how good it felt to go through it again.

Another thing that would make this band different from others I'd played in was their discipline. And in the beginning, also the fact that nobody tried to push his way into the spotlight. Something that no musician can really stick to. But I stopped trying to fill in the still moments in the songs and instead started to do my thing at the points where the others just weren't playing full-on. You were supposed to be able to understand the singing. Then I discovered a sound that was loud and distorted and wasn't even recognizable as a keyboard at all. It sounded more like a dying dinosaur. I played the dinosaur sound on every song—it was at least audible amidst all the other noise. It may not have been exactly what the rest of the band was expecting from me, but it was better than nothing—and luckily they didn't know anybody else back then who played keyboards and had the time and inclination to jam with them.

In our circles, joining a band didn't involved anything formal, and a lot of the time you never even discussed whether somebody was a member or not. If someone showed up for rehearsals regularly, they were a member of the band unless they were explicitly told not to come anymore. But that never actually happened because people always seemed to figure out on their own whether they were welcome or not. Any musician has to have at least that much intuition.

After that first rehearsal, I started going back to the basement again and again, and never had to think about whether I was a member of the band or not. And anyway, it wasn't even clear whether this really was a band, and whether this lineup would stay together—I mean, at that stage the group hadn't played a single concert. For me, a concert in front of strangers is the true starting point of a band. I still had time to get to know the less familiar members of the band.

Finally a few new people I could make music with, even if I was a little scared of them, since these were people who expected real input—it wasn't enough for them that I was funny, awkward Flake, the guy whose flaws everybody generously overlooked. I quickly became aware of my musical limitations, and I had to step things up if I wanted to continue to play with them instead of staying forever mired in my musty memories of East Germany.

Back in the old days it really had been enough at times for me to simply pop onstage with some other band, like Die Anderen, a band that provided the

name for an entire genre of music in the East, armed with my little Casio in order to feel like I was doing something really cool, like I was a big dog. But with this new band, nothing was going to come for free. At least I was able to take part in these powerful rehearsals, and that quickly gave me the sense that I was becoming part of something big, even if I didn't have the slightest idea just how big it would be.

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I step onto the wheel of the cauldron so I can hop into it, but quickly realize that there's barely any space left for me because the gas canister for the flash-pots is already in there. There are lamps built into the base that I have to avoid touching because they get so hot. I once fell onto one of the lamps during a rehearsal and burned the hell out of my hands—my skin stuck to the thin metal grate that protects the lamp itself. It stank of burnt flesh. Why does it smell so good when you grill out? Is it something to do with the salt or the beer? Or the type of flesh? My flesh just stank.

I have to squeeze past my keyboard, too, which is also in the cauldron. I'm a musician after all, and I want to play on the song. Though sometimes I forget. I pick up the keyboard and wriggle into the cauldron. Then I curl up in the bottom of it. The stage manager comes over and fills the cauldron with as much dry-ice fog as he can. I quickly hold my breath. Too late. Then the lid is placed on the cauldron and Till, who has just changed outfits, pulls it out onto the stage. Obviously I can't see this happen, but I feel the wheels rattling beneath me. I always wonder how he manages it since the whole contraption must weigh at least a ton. The band is playing full throttle. The song is called "Mein Teil" not full throttle; I just mean the band is playing hard. You could just as easily say they're playing full on, or full tilt. It just depends on your personal inclinations, I guess. People who are into cars use car metaphors, like they say someone has blown a gasket when somebody's pissed off. Or they say that something isn't firing on all cylinders if it isn't working right. Anyway, Till sometimes lifts up the lid of the cauldron for a second to let a bit of the fog out. There used to be an oxygen tank

inside so I could breathe despite all the fog. But it was always unexpectedly empty, and since I was counting on having fresh oxygen I wouldn't take a deep breath beforehand and would nearly suffocate. These days I can stifle my gasps. The only other time I manage that is at the movies, when there's a particularly tense scene and the whole audience is dead quiet. I have to cough and it makes me breathe in some of the fog. That makes me dizzy, so I turn on the light. At least this way I can tell up from down. The timing is perfect, because Till rips the lid off now and tosses it aside. It clangs loudly against the stage floor and I can feel the reverberations from inside the cauldron. The fog starts to seep out, lit beautifully from below by the lamps around me inside the cauldron.

Till starts to sing the first verse, and I pop dramatically out of the cauldron and play my melody on the keyboard, which I've quickly hooked onto the rim of the cauldron. Till's microphone is shaped like a knife and he keeps coming over to the cauldron and sticking me with it to see if I'm cooked yet. Apparently it's taking too long for his taste, so during the bridge he goes over and gets a flamethrower to really turn up the heat. It's probably becoming clear that we do a lot during the bridges of songs, since it's the only part when we don't all have to play or sing. In any event, Till aims Flamey—as we affectionately call our flamethrower—at me and blasts away. Since I'm expecting it, I duck out of the way. But it's still hot. Obviously it was just as hot at the concert before, but somehow I always forget just how hot it actually is. It just can't be. Maybe my skin has gotten thinner. I pop back up to show Till that it's going to take a lot more than that to take me out. More flames come my way. It may be just as hot, but by the second time around the shock is gone. Even so, I'm not laughing quite as much the second time I pop back up. This time—to show Till how tough guy I am—I stay up as long as I can, only ducking down when the flames are right in front of my face. The third blast of flames is bad again, and the only way I can get through the fourth blast is because I know there'll be a break afterwards. I hop up from the cauldron again and wave tauntingly at Till—he can't roast me to death that easily. In reality I'm just trying to catch my breath, since it would be deadly to breathe while surrounded by the flames. I'd inhale fire. Even now I can't really breathe because the flames have consumed all the oxygen in the air. It feels like

I'm inhaling concrete. I'll just have to catch my breath later. Till is pissed because I'm still not cooked. He's not giving up so easily. He hauls another flamethrower onto the stage, and this one is three times as big as the first one. He aims it at me. I drop into the cauldron at exactly the right moment. It's not just the flamethrower that is three times as big—so are the flames it shoots. The previous one made me sweat, but now I'm bone dry, all the fluid is being steamed out of me. My jacket is hot, too, and I have to be careful not to touch the zipper, which is white hot. It's like in the sauna—you can't take any metal items in because they can burn you. When I pop back up this time, I have to force myself to smile. The next blast is even hotter, and I consider just lying in the cauldron until things have cooled off a little. I would do it, too, if the heat lasted even a split second longer. Till seems to be enjoying the whole thing and this time shoots the flames even longer. It feels like my skin is on fire. I only pop up for a second, just so as not to be a poor sport, and then Till fires again. We've tried all sorts of things to make this stunt more bearable for me, but whatever blankets or other things we put in the cauldron just make it more difficult for me to move around, which actually increases the chances of me getting seriously injured. I've come to the conclusion that the best solution is for me to just grin and bear it. That approach works well in many situations. Just grin and bear it and it's over fast. Like now. Till is done, and I lie in the bottom of the cauldron looking for my slippers. I must be disoriented, because of course I'm looking for my gloves, not slippers. What made me think of slippers? I mean, I don't even wear slippers at home. I've been opposed to slippers since I was a kid, and I don't even like to visit people who ask me to take off my shoes before coming in. It's probably because of my socks. Of course, I don't like to wear gloves, either. They make me feel as if I've lost the feeling in my hands. But now I need them. I can't see anything because of all the smoke.

During the first rehearsals for the tour I didn't have gloves, and when I went to climb out of the cauldron after all the bursts from the flamethrowers, the skin on my fingers stuck to the rim of the cauldron, which was so hot it was practically glowing. The pain during the next concert almost drove me mad, since I still had to play with my fingertips. But at some point my fingers healed again. I

just tried to play as few notes as possible while they were healing. For a while I had no fingerprint, either, and could have robbed a bank, but I didn't think of it.

I've found the gloves now and pull them on. I have to hurry, otherwise the song will be over before I get out of the tub. In which case Till would have won, so to speak. So I try to put myself in a sporting frame of mind and swing myself out of the cauldron. Then I toss the gloves back into the tub since I'll need them again tomorrow. Right at that moment, the pyro technicians set off the effects on my belt. I run disoriented across the stage, hoping Till doesn't catch me. Just as I'm about to take a deep breath, I turn awkwardly and take in the smoke from one of the flash-pots. It's pure poison, maybe even radioactive, something to do with Strontium or whatever. The song is coming to its finale. I cross the stage while comets are shot down at me. They land right next to me so it looks from the audience as if they are actually hitting me. Sometimes, when I stray too far back, they do hit me, and it hurts really badly and for several days afterwards I have sores that look like giant love-bites.

But today everything goes well, and we pull off the song with no hassles. Why was I so nervous? While the outro of the song is playing, the pyro guys take off my belt backstage, and I take a few cautious breaths. Then, as the rear curtain falls, I dash over to the side of the stage where my keyboards are. I deftly weave my way through the cables and spotlights in the dark. I run into Till and he smacks me lightheartedly on the ass.