

Sacred Sounds of Grass - Bluegrass Gospel from Germany

In the USA it's commonplace, in Europe bands sometimes have a hard time: in the USA hardly a bluegrass show goes by without a few gospel tunes, hardly a CD is released without at least one religious song, quite a few bands are concentrating exclusively on sacred tunes. The choice of songs is unlimited and growing steadily. This is not the place to go into details about the differences between north-American and European religious feelings, but there is only one band in Europe specialising in gospel songs: Sacred Sounds of Grass from Germany.

They have been active for many years, have released a series of three LPs in the late eighties and are now putting

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the first European, live recorded gospel CD onto the market. The core of band are the Hain brothers, Thilo (born March 28, 1962) and Sam (born February 22, 1964) from Dillenburg in the Westerwald region (between Frankfurt and Cologne). They were raised in a Christian and musically active home. And soon they were part of the family playing at private and church functions.

In 1974 the brothers happened to listen to country music on the radio. They were intrigued and soon found bluegrass, which turned out to be their music for life. Thilo bought a banjo, Sam got a bass (guitars were already available in their home). In May 1979 they performed in public for the first time at a school party, calling themselves "Bluegrass Busters". Their partner for many years, Volkmar Heinz, was playing the guitar. At this point,



only about half of their repertoire consisted of gospel songs.

The change towards gospel songs came only when the brothers were attending university in Siegen. Thilo had started studying theology and music, then decided to become a commercial clerk and today is the manager of the export department of a textile company. Sam went on to become a commercial clerk right away and is now specializing in the sale of machinery. While at university, they both started making contacts into the Christian music community which by no means is limited to bluegrass.

They now called themselves "The New Commandment", and were soon asked to fill the time between two bands at a concert. They did so with overwhelming success, made a hit with the audience and became well-known in their circles and beyond. They even got into television and radio. In 1985 they finally changed their name to Sacred Sounds Of Grass. They same year they finally got to see some real live bluegrass by American stars, in this case Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver in Tuebingen, Germany.

A few demo recordings served as the beginning of their recording career and made them realize that a few instrumental tunes in between Christian songs would be a valuable asset. The brothers saw themselves as musicians playing religious tunes and not as preachers who would use the music just to transport the message (which quite often is the case). The recordings were remarkable in that the brothers recorded everything by themselves using a multi-playback system without their guitar player Volkmar Heinz nor the bass player which they used as a guest in concerts.

Apart from that they are a bluegrass band like no other. They studied bluegrass history into its very small details

and started to make contacts with their bluegrass heroes in the USA. They went on learning new instruments and achieved high levels of proficiency. After so many preparations it was time for their own record, which was released in 1986 as "Back to the Bible" on Lord Records, a label specializing in religious music. The brothers played everything by themselves, with Volkmar Heinz helping with the vocals. There were two self-penned instrumentals, two self-composed songs as well as an a cappella song. The record received high praise in Bluegrass Unlimited (June 1987): "A pleasant surprise... compares favorably with young American groups... The singing is virtually indistinguishable from American bands", but was not very popular in a church newspaper which called it tiring music.

The contacts with people in the USA started to pay off. Harry West, the well-known old time musician and instrument dealer, wrote the liner notes for the LP. The same thing was done by Frank Wakefield a year later for their second LP "Calling You". And Bill Clifton, Red Rector and Art Stamper were also involved. Again, they included a few songs and instrumentals of their own and another a cappella tune.

During this period something decisive happened - they added a bass player to their band, Alfred Bonk (born February 6, 1964), at the time training to become a German and biology teacher. He had been an active musician for many years before joining Thilo and Sam. Two years later, the three recorded a third LP/CD called "I've Never Been There". Again, they included a few songs and instrumentals of their own and another a cappella tune. Soon Volkmar Heinz left the band. He was replaced for a short time by Heiko Ahrend and after that his brother Hendrik; both from northern Germany (Frisia) where Alfred Bonk comes from, too. Hendrik first attracted attention as a member of the "Roving Gamblers" band (around 1980). Later he played in various German and Dutch groups as well as performing convincingly on various instruments



with quite a few American bands on their European tours.

At the time he joined Sacred Sounds of Grass he was doing his civil service time (the alternative to going to the army in Germany). In 1988 they went on a tour to the German Democratic Republic (which was still in existence), where they found a small following for bluegrass.

Of course, they also wanted to play in the USA and show what Europeans can do with bluegrass. They toured the USA in 1989 (with Norbert Dengler on guitar), in 1990 and in 1993. Apart from that they went there quite often to keep in touch and to play with the stars. The highlight was their 1990 visit with Jimmy Martin who was very cooperative and took them over to Earl Scruggs' place where they had a happy jam session. While in the USA, they recorded a cassette mixing gospel with other bluegrass songs as "The Main Brothers Band" (with Heiko Ahrend on guitar). It was released in 1991 and includes (among others) "Hit Parade of Love" as an example of non-religious bluegrass.

In Europe they shared the stage with many stars from the USA, including Peter Rowan & Jerry Douglas, Clifton, Rector & Stamper, Doyle Lawson and the Lynn Morris Band, and they performed with Jim Eanes and Bill Harrell. They played in many European countries such as France, the Netherlands, Austria and Switzerland where they performed in 1992 at the Thun Blue-

grass Festival, and they will play the Bluegrass Family Festival this year.

There was one further recording in 1996 which they released as the Hain Brothers. It features Christmas instrumental music and is called "Mit den Hirten will ich gehen". These are sacred sounds, but the brothers like to fool their listeners just a little bit as the recording is not kitsch at all, but wild versions in rockabilly and swing styles.

In the same year they won third place at the buskers festival in Dortmund, where you would certainly not expect such a band. In October 1997 they had to play into one microphone at a festival in the Netherlands, as made fashionable by Doyle Lawson, and because it went so well, they have kept using it and now prefer performing this way which forces them to move around on stage. In November 1998 they went to Vienna to participate in the SPBGMA European contest, where the band placed seventh, after the dominating Czech bands. But banjo picker of the day was certainly Thilo Hain. Which they see as one of the very highlights in the band's history and Thilo's musical career.

Compared to Switzerland, the Ger-

man bluegrass scene has not been growing and the audience numbers are slightly falling. Even in the church sector work for bands is now limited due to the general cut-down in spendings and due to the changing tastes of the public. On the other hand there are limits imposed by family and professional duties, as Thilo and Hendrik are both married. And for Sacred Sounds of Grass it's also difficult to meet as the four members live so far apart. While Sam and Thilo live in the middle part of Germany, Hendrik lives in the south (near Stuttgart) where he works as an organ-builder (his father is a famous master of this craft). Alfred lives in the north and working as a teacher he can't take off whenever he likes. In addition, Thilo is also active in other musical styles, repairs and sells instruments and has always an interesting choice of guitars, mandolins and banjos on offer, and is also teaching music. It's thus quite difficult to practice and even playing a concert has to be organised well in advance. But a bluegrass gospel band is not just another band where anybody can join or is willing to join.

Thus the idea of recording a live gospel CD has been long in the making. But good results take their time, especially since the CD should not only show how extremely well they play their instruments, but also how well every note fits the general musical picture (with other bands it's often just some individuals playing by themselves and too many notes anyway). Each of the band members is a first-rate lead and harmony singer. They could all well be recommended to Doyle Lawson as new members of his band. But they are not modelling themselves after him nor are they imitating him. Their sources are older, closer to the bluegrass founding fathers whose repertoires they know very well and where they have uncovered many forgotten treasures. If there were a prize for the most American band in Europe - Sacred Sounds of Grass would be a hot candidate.

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