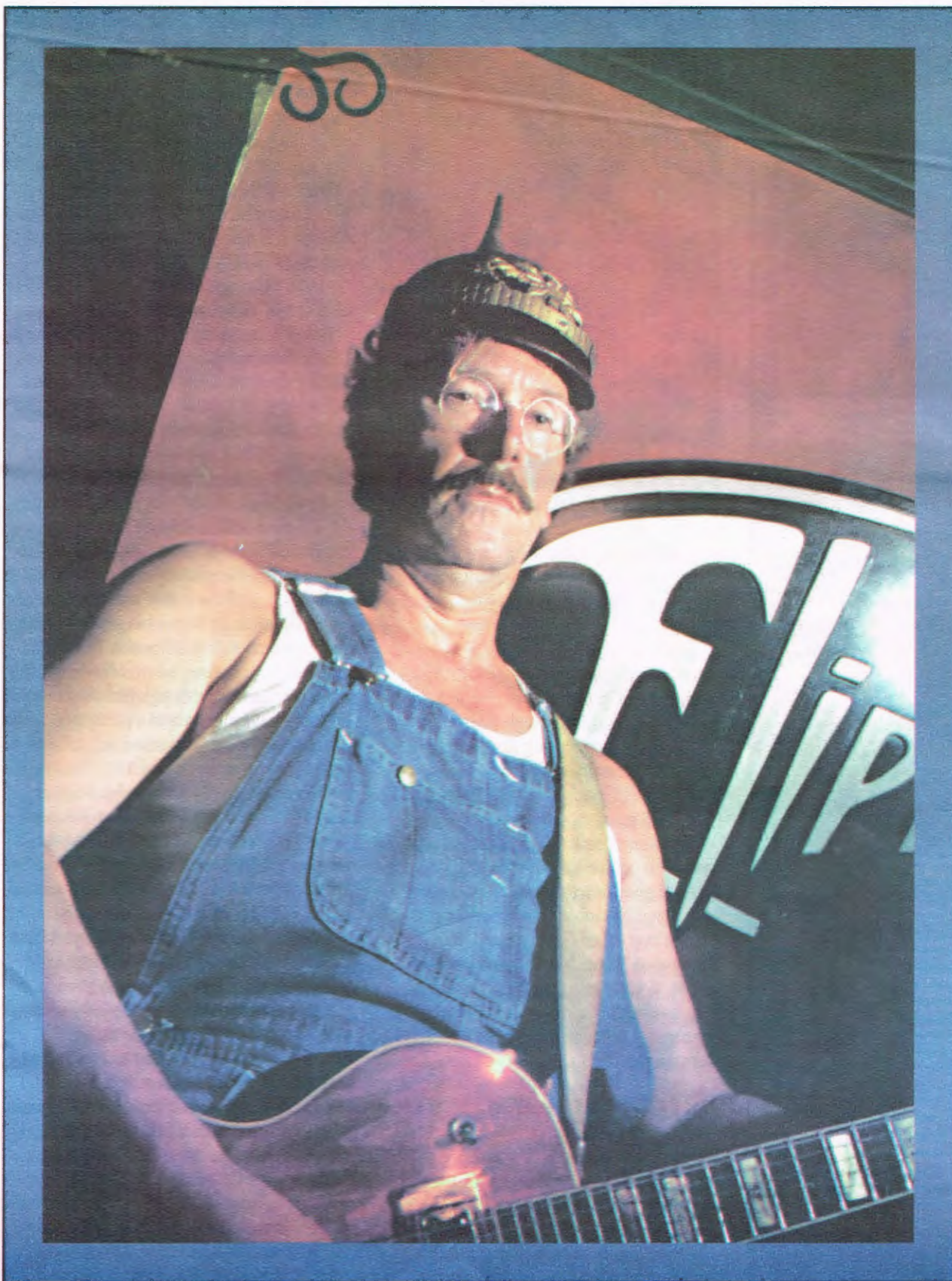


Everybody, repeat after me... *Swig.* And again. *Gulp.*

by Rob D'Amico
Photography by Barton Wilder Custom Images



Repet after me” is the mantra of Herman the German, a fixture of the Austin music scene for twenty-five years who has gained little notoriety beyond local recognition for his strange blend of surf, polka and rockabilly...and his odd accent.

A tall, lanky guitarist with gold spectacles and grim demeanor, he spouts “Repeat after me” after each song, shortly before taking a rather healthy swig of beer.

Although his peers consider him a master on the guitar and a musical genius, Herman still hasn’t broken out of the Austin music scene since he moved here in the early seventies and obtained a green card. And without much press coverage, he has remained an enigma to local audiences, even to his diehard fans.

Even so, a drinking spree with Herman at the Little Longhorn Saloon on Burnet Road revealed answers to some of the more obvious questions that I’ve wondered about after watching him on stage, and “repeating after him” for a decade.

What’s with the helmet?

When audiences get their first dose of Herman the German and his band, Das Cowboy, they inevitably wonder, “Who the hell is this guy?”

It’s an understandable reaction, since he stomps around the stage in overalls, goose-stepping his way through rockabilly classics and surf instrumentals. At the height of his set, Herman pulls out his trademark, a World War I, pointed Kaiser helmet, mumbles, “Let’s go back to the motherland,” and dives into an upbeat polka.

His accent, heard between songs and on an occasional vocal, doesn’t sound anything at all like German. In fact, I often thought he was some kind of impostor from Iceland, since his vocals seemed to have the texture of a cold grunt. The fact that his only CD release was produced in Finland didn’t help solve the riddle of his background either.

“I thought he was a nutcase,” said Mark Rubin, bassist for the Bad Livers and Rubinchik’s Orkestyr. But after playing with Herman for a couple of years in the early nineties, Rubin’s opinion changed considerably. “Herman is a unique individual,” Rubin said. “He’s kind of an unrecognized genius...totally dedicated.”

However, genius and dedication don’t always translate into fame or money, Rubin noted, and it remains to be seen whether someone playing such a bizarre strain of music will ever make a lasting mark on Austin or anywhere else.

But is he really German?

Part of Herman’s mystique is his rather odd upbringing. Yes, he is technically German, since he was born

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Herman Dietrich in Friedrichshafen, a small town near the Alps in Southern Germany where Zeppelins were once manufactured. After his parents died in a car crash, Herman was adopted at age five and moved to Belgium, where he grew up near Brussels speaking Flemish.

"I don't even know German," Herman said. "I don't really remember too much Flemish, although I know a little French." Add twenty-seven years of Texan, and you get a better idea why no one can peg his accent.

"The first few years I didn't believe he couldn't speak German, but now I do," said Inka Owolder, a German native and a longtime fan and friend. Owolder first spotted Herman while walking by the Black Cat Lounge on Sixth Street one night eight years ago. "We saw this funny guy in overalls, and...it sort of threw me."

"The music was just fun, stomping music," Owolder recalled of her first Herman show. "It's a great-sounding mixture."

With folksy tunes like the "Drifter's Polka" mixed with more obscure pieces like "Shake Dancing" by Little Walter, his audiences are often bewildered. (He also is famous for his version of "Hava Nagila," a Jewish folk tune, and his surf version of the "Munsters' Theme".)

"Herman's music is like nothing you'll hear," Mark Rubin said. In fact, Rubin said it reminds him of listening to something totally foreign, like a "Pakistani musical."

Many local musicians agree that Herman's ability on the guitar is unrivaled, since he blends the different styles without making them sound like three different flavors.

"His music is kind of like a gumball machine," said Todd Wulfmeyer, former stand-up bassist for 8 1/2 Souvenirs. "Take every era of guitar playing, make them all different colors and throw them into a gumball machine. Each turn you get a different color guitar. He knows a lot of stuff...He pretty much knows the history of the electric guitar. He knows what's good in every genre...and takes the best from it."

Herman explained that his appearance sometimes steals the show from his music, especially the pointed Kaiser helmet, which doesn't often earn him high marks.

"A lot of people think I'm politically incorrect," he said, since they confuse the World War I German soldier's helmet with Nazi head gear.

Wulfmeyer said he had heard of problems with people thinking Herman was a Nazi. "I guess anything German can be considered Nazi from some people's view."

Not everyone is so confused, though. Because of "Hava Nagila," an elderly Jewish woman asked Herman to play at her grandson's bar mitzvah. "Considering my name, I thought it was a big honor," Herman recalled.

The only white guy

Anyone worried about Herman having Nazi tendencies would be interested to know that his first stint in the Austin music scene during the mid-seventies began as the only white guy in an East Austin soul band.

Herman played bass guitar with Willy Samson and the Attitudes, a group that headlined at the now defunct Oak Tree Lounge on East Twelfth Street. He said he

relished the experience, although some of the shows were a little rough.

"We played one night when a guy got stabbed, right in front of us. There was fucking blood flying everywhere. It was pretty weird. We kept playing, but eventually we stopped." Herman also lived in East Austin, a place drastically different from his childhood turf near Brussels. He grew up in the late fifties listening to polka at festivals in the town square, and although he once called polka "music for old people," it would eventually become a mainstay of his sound. Plain old rock-'n'-roll was the real rage for him and his friends, who would often find it blaring at the festival bumper-car ride. Gene Vincent, Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard were his idols.

"Gene Vincent was as popular in Europe as Elvis was in the states," he said. "To me, he was the best."

It was The Shadows and their instrumental tunes, however, that spurred Herman to pick up a guitar and start messing around with it. "It was a cheap little acoustic, terrible to play." He mentioned "Apache" as the key influence in his musical life.

"I formed a little trio. We played what they now call surf music...I was thirteen. The first song I ever played in public was "Wipeout." That was at a church function. But really, all the bands in town played The Shadows, because they were instrumental, and they didn't have to sing."

In 1972, at age nineteen, he flew to Houston to visit America for the first time. "I didn't want to go to New York, because I didn't know English, and I was afraid of getting mugged. Texas sounded good, had a good ring to it...you know, cowboys and Indians and everything."

Houston was a bit intimidating as well, and he remembers seeing the city's towering skyline coming in from the airport. "At the time, it was an eerie site." But the United States immediately hooked him, and with the exception of a brief trip back to Brussels, he's been here ever since.

In Houston, he began his career playing surf instrumentals at a Spanish Restaurant with a friend. "I don't know why these guys liked us," he said, although he noted that he has always maintained a pretty good following from Hispanic audiences, perhaps because of the polka sound.

Herman came to Austin about a year later to visit and drove around downtown. "There was not a single car on the street. It felt like a sleepy little town, totally quiet." He quickly abandoned big city Houston and began playing the East Austin gigs.

By the mid-eighties, he had helped form the Ranchhands with guitarist Mike Long and drummer Curly Simpson. Although the group was anything but country-western, its name drew audiences expecting country. The band members began to complain about the name, since it fooled audiences, and Herman suddenly remembered what a co-worker in Houston (during a brief job on an oil rig) used to call him: "Herman the German." The title stuck, both on Herman and the band, which also tagged on the name Das Cowboy.

Paul Sessums—the late owner of the Black Cat Lounge—offered Herman a gig as one of the first bands to start playing at the Sixth Street lounge. The Black Cat was

a bar that broke the mold of trendy upscale clubs of the time by offering fans a venue resembling a garage with cheap beer in a can. A bucket on a rope was used to collect band tips. "He gave me twenty dollars the first time I played, then doubled it the next week, then doubled it the next, then said, 'I won't be able to double it next week.'"

Before long, the group found another home at the now defunct Austin Outhouse at Guadalupe and Thirty-Fifth Street.

"That was our stomping ground. That's where we learned how to play...And all the things I say now, like 'Repeat after me,' I started there."

It was also the heyday for Herman, according to some fans. "I played with Herman at the 1993 headliner for South by Southwest at the Outhouse with Mike and the Cosmonauts and Teisco Del Rey and some European guys," Mark Rubin remembered. "It could be the top gig of my life. That was Herman at a pinnacle."

The band might do a rockabilly number like Gene Vincent's "Blue Jean Bop" and Carl Perkins' "Right String Baby," and then Herman would yodel away a polka or launch an eerie surf instrumental from his Gretsch guitar. Backing him up with Das Cowboy were Mark Rubin or Kevin Smith on bass, Jeff "The Viking" Morr  or Curly Simpson on drums, and guitar from Bert McIlman and, occasionally, Jim Diamond.

When the Outhouse closed its doors in 1995, the band—now composed of McIlman, Chuck Pierpont on drums, and Denzel Smith on bass—began opening for Junior Brown at the Continental Club and later moved to a string of shows at Flipnotics.

'Self-imposed, homelessness

Once you've nailed down Herman the musician, the stage guy with the overalls and pointed helmet, you still have to wonder about his day-to-day life as a German-Belgium native with permanent resident alien status in this country. And that's where the enigma begins again.

You can define the day-to-day struggle of most musicians by pointing to their dreams of making it big, dreams of getting laid, the realities of getting a paycheck. On another level, you'll find musicians trying to support families, earn respectability in their trade, grow musically, and find time to play while working the day job.

None of these realities applies to Herman, who at age forty-eight has no attachments, no wife or kids or family with whom he keeps close ties. His family in Brussels even looks down on him for using his talents on rock-'n'-roll guitar, and as an adoptive child with five siblings, he seems to have fallen willingly into the black sheep role.

Herman has no day job, no continuing one that is. But he's done just about every "odd" job imaginable and lets little anecdotes about his work squirt out until you get an unbelievable list of temporary trades: chauffeur for a drunken Englishman, oil company worker chastised by suspicious KKK co-workers, a stint as a hand model, a part in the Houston Opera, the expected pizza delivery, waiter and cab driver gigs, mowing lawns.... "Nothing I could hurt my fingers with," he said.

To cap it off, Herman doesn't always
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have a home. "He has this kind of self-imposed homelessness," Mark Rubin said. "He's been doing it for quite a while, and I think it's taking its toll."

To put it simply, Herman often house-sits from one place to the next, using what he calls a large "circle of friends" with couches or regular vacations to keep him off the streets.

"He always wanted a room full of guitars," Rubin said. "Well he has the guitars now. Unfortunately, he has no room."

Although some think the grind without a home has left Herman's music a bit "gritty" nowadays, Herman seems to revel in the role of having nothing more than a storage space and old van for his possessions. "My needs are pretty simple," he said. "I'm used to living on a shoestring."

As Inka Owolder puts it, "He probably



couldn't live any other way now. Something always comes up (and) there's a place for him to go...house-sit."

Indeed, the day of our interview, he was staying in a doctor's office near Hyde Park and driving a friend's Range Rover.

Also missing is a driving ambition, although in his defense, you might simply call him realistic. "I never have entertained big ideas," he said, "Because my type of music has a limited market. It's like the opposite of Bob Dylan. That guy had something to say. This is just drinking music."

Herman said the popularity of "my kind" of music had recent a high spot—"Dick Dale (whose Stratocaster blasts off at the start of the movie) *Pulp Fiction*. That was basically it."

Despite the accolades from fellow musicians, many Austinites don't have a clue who Herman is, since he's never achieved much notice beyond being crowned headliner at the Dog & Duck Pub's annual Oktoberfest, the heyday of gigs at the Outhouse, and occasional opening acts for Junior Brown at the Continental Club. He currently plays gigs at Flipnotics and the Carousel Lounge. And brides and grooms find that his polka with a Texas twang makes Herman a good fit for area weddings.

Herman noted that he almost got a huge break when Steven Soderbergh, indie filmmaker of *Sex Lies and Videotape* fame, picked the "Happy Herman Polka" for the soundtrack of *The Underneath*, a 1995 film noir shot in Austin. The film only opened in a dozen or so markets and faded away

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to single copies on the video shelves. "I still get royalty checks," Herman said with a wince, "mostly like two dollars seventy cents, but one time I got ninety dollars."

Not everyone is so pessimistic, and fans and those appreciative of his talent continue to believe in Herman finding the opportunity to make a lucrative niche for his music.

"He's getting some limited success, and he's liable to get picked up by one of these independent labels," said Michael Parker, a former bartender at the Dog & Duck who booked Herman for the pub's festivals.

"His act, in a way, is sort of a novelty act," Inka Owolder said. "If the right person with money comes along...he could do it—

make it big."

Since Herman doesn't entertain much optimism for hitting the big time, what's his inspiration for playing? "I love it," he said.

"I think it's that moment on stage, where you reach a point...when you get that high from the music, and with the fans," Todd Wulfmeyer said. "He's in the middle of 'Ghost Riders' or any song, and there's a certain *moment*...I think he's a deeply sincere and passionate person, and he's not concerned with the trivialities of daily life."

Maybe not trivialities like having an electric bill. But the trivial sometimes becomes important for even the simplest of goals.

"My dream, my goal, is to record another

CD of my own and sell it at gigs...that and go on the road," Herman said. Not the loftiest of goals, but a nice one for Herman, since he easily sold all copies of his CD, both in the record stores and at shows.

The only problem is that Herman doesn't ever seem to have enough money up-front to get a CD produced himself. He had to sell his first-and-only CD for eighteen bucks at gigs—a lot of money at the time, since it cost about ten dollars to produce each disc in Finland. Local record stores didn't charge so much and only left him with about a dollar of profit from each sale.

"I like to play, but God, to do that means I give up a lot of stuff," he said.

Will Herman break free of Austin, get the CD he's been looking for? Regardless, he said Austin is home, and he'll keep looking for new stomping grounds here.

Repeat after me...Let's go back to the motherland.

Rob D'Amico is a local writer whose freelance stories have covered a wide range of topics—from seedy motels and technology to environmental politics. He has been responding enthusiastically to Herman's request of "Repeat after me" for more than a decade. For more on Herman the German, visit www.extraeye.com/herman.

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