

Forever Young



By accident I found myself in Kulturhaus NIHZ on a Saturday in March 2015, attending a concert by Sarah Brendel. I had never heard of her, but that's no surprise with thousands of genres and millions of musicians in comparison with my limited knowledge of music. Bobby and Sanna of the Kulturhaus expected a large audience for this occasion, so I stepped in to lend a hand.

Sarah Brendel is a singer/songwriter that is best-known in Germany, but she has a fan base in the rest of Europe and a bit of the States too. She plays and particularly sings in a style that reminds me of the female singers from the sixties and early seventies, notably Joan Baez, Janis Joplin, Joni Mitchell and Melanie. Her characteristic husky voice brings Melanie to my mind, but as soon as she picks up her blues harp, there is a lot of Bob Dylan too!

She has a regular concert tour circuit; besides that, she gives benefit concerts in behalf of for instance refugee support organizations and she plays a role in the gospel-scene. She composes her own music and writes her own songs with often a socially engaged or Christian background. Besides on the theatre stages she brings her songs on extraordinary places like hospitals and jails.

So, her music brought me back in time to the late sixties and early seventies. The time of the protest songs.

I frankly admit that as a youngster I did not connect to the protest song generation, I was too young to understand the subjects. When I started listening to music on the radio as a ten-year-old, I mainly heard Top 40 charts material that was transmitted by the then illegal pop station Radio Veronica, a station that could be received via Medium Wave in the west of the country (192 meter if I remember it correctly). Doing so, gradually my musical taste evolved towards sympho- and prog-rock by bands such as Ekseption, Focus, The Nice, Emerson Lake and Palmer and Yes. Mainly instrumental music. I was less attracted to vocal music.

One of my then problems with the songs of those days, the late sixties and early seventies, was that I did not understand a word of a foreign language, so I did not find out the deeper meaning of the protest songs that characterized the generation before me. *Make Love, no War* was a vague concept for me ;-). Almost as vague as making love itself, I must say, because my parents and other educators were quite afraid that it would attract our attention! The things I knew about the songs, I heard them from others that understood the foreign languages barely better than myself.

A nice example of my ignorance was the hit *Je t' aime, moi non plus* by Jane Birkin and Serge Gainsbourg from 1969. Even though I started to learn French in the first form of the Grammar School, I understood little to nothing of the somewhat erotically charged lyrics of the song, and our female French teacher was not quite willing to explain the translation in a classroom full of hot adolescents. Well, every classmate including me understood that the lyrics were erotic indeed (and thus we were interested), but as a consequence of ignorance in our minds the meaning became an exaggerated sexist myth that was far removed from the actual song text. In fact, its meaning was just like they say it in English: *Faire l' Amour! (et pas de Guerre!)*. Note that the text *moi non plus* remains a puzzle in the context of the song.

I spent my adolescence and thus my Grammar School years in Amsterdam, a city that was brimming over with progressive action, the protest generation was well represented there! Hippies on the Dam Square, the infamous eviction of the hippies by the Marines, the first occupation of the Maagdenhuis, the directorate of the university (I was waiting for the tram near the Lievertje on the Spui when the police drove out the students), the hippie sit-ins in the Vondelpark and the protest marches against the Vietnam War near the American Embassy at the Museumplein (our school was just besides the embassy).

It was, however, the struggle of the generation before us. I had just entered the scene. To add insult to injury I had moved from the area of the Alblasserwaard in the river delta of Holland, we used to live in Sliedrecht, the port of call of the dredgers of Bos and Kalis. It was part of the *Bible Belt* area in Holland, there was nothing extraordinary over there and if you moved out of the mainstream, you could be sure that the locals would try to correct you and move you back to the path of the righteous by all means. Consequently, the freedom and liberalism in Amsterdam presented a culture shock for me.

I barely understood the meaning of the text *Johnson go Home!* on the banners and I did not know the bad things that happened in Vietnam, like Agent Orange and the atrocities at My Lai. Despite the efforts of our progressive history teacher who was a moderate sympathizer of the CPN, the then Dutch communist party, we were hardly aware of what he called crimes of western imperialism. On the other hand, we did not like a communist society either and he obviously had sufficient insight to abstain from recommending the Marxist ideas.

We were merely spectators, becoming members of the *Lost Generation*, also referred to as *Generation X*. It would take quite a while before this generation started its social engagement with a quite different idealism than the social criticism from the sixties.

Whatever, the melodies by Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell, Melanie and of course Bob Dylan were part of this era and made some of the atmosphere that I remembered from my adolescent years. Later, after I had grown up and had learned a few foreign languages, I was able to get some idea of the meaning and significance of their songs.

It was the sound of my adolescent years that Sarah Brendel brought along. As a matter of fact she did not restrict herself to protest songs, but she presented songs with a message too that unfortunately was hard to follow in the back of the hall. Except the song that was officially the last one of her concert, a cover of *Forever Young* by Bob Dylan. For me this song became the message of this evening...

In the present day I sometimes have the feeling that our generation, *Generation-X*, has lost its meaning. Many of my generation are heading for retirement by now. Unfortunately, our "liberal" government (that is manned by the oldies from the protest generation) has postponed our retirement dates, I guess to prolong the impression that we are only worthy members of society as long we have work and bring in money. To add insult to injury they also budget-cut all means to survive retirement once it is there, to make sure that we do not cost money once we finally are able to enjoy a well-earned but slightly cut-back pension...

That is a grim and fearful thought. To put things into perspective again, Dylan's song was quite useful. Let's make a free interpretation of copyright with a full quotation of this remarkable song. It enabled Sarah Brendel to create an almost sacral atmosphere in the concert hall for a while.

*May God bless and keep you always
May your wishes all come true
May you always do for others
And let others do for you
May you build a ladder to the stars
And climb on every rung*

*May you stay forever young
Forever young, forever young
May you stay forever young.*

*May you grow up to be righteous
May you grow up to be true
May you always know the truth
And see the lights surrounding you
May you always be courageous
Stand upright and be strong*

*May you stay forever young
Forever young, forever young
May you stay forever young.*

*May your hands always be busy
May your feet always be swift
May you have a strong foundation*

*When the winds of changes shift
May your heart always be joyful
And may your song always be sung*

*May you stay forever young
Forever young, forever young
May you stay forever young.*

To stay forever young, you will not achieve it with a remake to a young god or goddess at the age of sixty by means of plastic surgery. I guess that after two weeks you'll find out that the wrinkles are back, including the frown that is caused by cynicism concerning the present-day world and society. Not speaking about your heart that will not be able to drive the sporty and artificially youthful imago. Neither is it a trip on a Harley to Mongolia at the age of sixty-four. I guess that you'll find out that saddle-soreness comes up before you leave Europe behind.

No, my interpretation is that the song is about the time that you were young and truly believed in your ideals and you were sure that you could improve or even save the world. *Make Love, No War...* (don't forget to do that with some discretion, else a war around the scarce natural resources of this planet might quite well be possible).

Fortunately, youngsters with ideals are still there! In the audience, I saw a girl that dedicated herself to help the refugees from the Middle East that had arrived in Nordhorn. She was so full of her ideals to help them that her voice could barely keep track with the things she wanted to explain, so full of unadulterated passion and force. I guess that is what we need in a time in which many are affected by neo-liberal and populist cynicism and distrust. A time in which at times charity seems to have turned into a market with likewise salaries.

Her enthusiasm to help refugees is a counterbalance to reactions like the Pegida movement, even though I do share their concern that a religion that is based on strict and rigid submission to (a prefabricated interpretation by clergy or ruling class of) the will of a deity could cause huge conflicts with people that enjoy more freedom or just have other opinions. My father used to say that you should never stop thinking about what is good and right yourself, and that a tradition was no guarantee for that! In my opinion he was right, in the opinion of his fellow-believers he apparently was not...

I hope that the girl remains as motivated and spontaneous as she showed tonight and that she will grow in her ideals. I hope that no one will take away her ideals of a better world from her, or just belittle them as just a drop in the ocean. I hope that she will be inspiring for others too. *May you stay forever young, in this way.*

I guess that is what Dylan means with the song: May you keep your youthful idealism and confidence and act accordingly, whatever your age. ;-) Maybe I should try to find out where mine have gone after all these years...