

POSTCARD FROM TURKEY

Avant-garde musician acquires taste for Turkish delights

By Yenni Kwok



Alexander Hacke jams up with neo-psychedelic band Baba Zula on the Bosphorus River. Photo: Corazon International

Istanbul has long been thought of as an axis of east and west, thus the "bridge" in the film *Crossing the Bridge - The Sound of Istanbul* could refer to Turkey's largest city. But it may as well be the universal power of music.

The film, scripted and directed by the Turkish-German Fatih Akin, features more than a dozen musicians and a variety of genres, ranging from neo-psychedelic, rock and hip-hop to sufi, Kurdish and Arabesque.

In this Turkish version of the *Buena Vista Social Club*, Alexander Hacke, the bassist of German avant-garde band Einstürzende Neubauten, roams the musical labyrinth of Istanbul and beyond, discovering all sorts of Turkish music along the way.

The idea for the documentary, to be screened at the Hong Kong International Film Festival, came when Akin was filming *Head On*, partly shot in Istanbul with a soundtrack by the Roma musician Selim Sesler.

"It was a tremendous experience, being able to dive deep into this treasure of extremely powerful and heartfelt music," says 41-year-old Hacke.

"The dedication of musicians and the passion of their listeners alike, is absolutely overwhelming. Music at large has a completely different value in Istanbul, compared to its perception in the ever-so-sober west."

Hacke's collaboration with Akin started with *Head On*. Trying to get someone to go to Istanbul to record Sesler's music, Klaus Maeck, one of Akin's producers and manager of Einstürzende Neubauten, called Hacke asking for the phone number of a sound engineer.

"I refused to provide that number and offered my services instead," Hacke says. "Fatih Akin then observed how well I got along with those Roma musicians without the ability to communicate in a common language besides music."

Hacke's preference for portable technology, rather than traditional studios, made him even more suitable for the job. The filmmaker also liked the fact that Hacke is open-minded, experienced in the field, and, while a westerner, is still something of an outsider.

However, having Hacke involved also carried some risk. "The audience's and critics' reaction to Hacke is quite controversial," Maeck says. "Some people just can't stand the guy, or maybe his beard or his voice ... [but] even if Hacke polarises [audiences] a lot, we think that he was a good choice - not a commercial one."

"Hacke is a 100 per cent true musician, and so are all the characters he meets in the film. That's why he can talk to all of them without words."

Berlin-based Einstürzende Neubauten, German for "collapsing new buildings" – Hacke has been a member since he was 15 – are renowned for pushing the limits of experimental music with the use of drills, saws and cutters. Hacke has also collaborated with various artists, including The Tiger Lilies, Danielle de Picciotto, Crime and the City Solution and Gianna Nannini.

But what does he think about *Crossing the Bridge* being compared to Wim Wenders' *Buena Vista Social Club*, with himself taking the role of Ry Cooder? "Well, how could one not be honoured by such a comparison?" the bassist says.

Maeck was less pleased about the association. "We never intended any similarity," he says. "Our film is different – it features many bands, not just one."

The various personalities featured in the film are as diverse as their music. Moustached heartthrob Orhan Gencebay is known as "the Elvis of Arabesque", while socially conscious rapper Ceza rejects the violence advocated by US gangsta-rappers. Sezen Aksu provides a memorable ending, singing the melancholy *Istanbul Hatirasi* (*Memories of Istanbul*).

It's been two years since they shot the documentary, but Hacke still feels sentimental about Istanbul. "The place just oozes spirit and, considering the estimated population of 15 million and the ethnic issues, it's a remarkably gentle

place in the way people live with each other.

"Also, a great sense of solidarity between musicians of entirely different backgrounds and social standings is observed."

Einstürzende Neubauten clearly are keen on travelling – Hacke's band-mate Blixa Bargeld has moved to Beijing. Has Hacke thought of going elsewhere? "There are still many places and cities that I haven't seen," he says. "My passport has many stamps from Turkey, but, hey, I've never been to China."

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