

The Losers

Krauts on the loose • By Gregor Kessler

In some ways, the story of Germany's Losers runs synchronous to that of thousands of European beat bands in the mid-sixties: five kids are shown a path out of suburbia's rigidity via the British sounds blasting from their radios. In other ways their story is so unique that it needs to be told in greater detail. The potent cocktail of juvenile enthusiasm, naivety and teenage hubris sets them on a fast-paced rollercoaster ride up to formerly unimaginable highs. For a short while they reigned supreme in their hometown. It made up for the painful depths.

In the beginning, which equals 1965 in this tale, the Losers were less a band than a tempting idea floating around in a schoolyard. Willi Scheibe, a good looking 15-year-old Mick Jagger worshipper, dreamed up a band that he could front as a singer. Being a Stones fan he liked the underlying unconformity of the name, the hobo and beat connotations, and the idea of a radical alternative to the square lifestyle of his hometown. And Bad Oldesloe, a town of around 20,000, 45 minutes north of Hamburg, was as square as you'd imagine German mid-'60s provincial areas to be. Nevertheless, finding friends to join the Losers was easy. Scheibe was good at talking and made everybody feel cherished. Plus being popular with the girls made him a promising role model.



The Losers, 1966. L to R: Roland Arndt, Thomas Kirsch, Karl-Heinz Carstens, Manfred Jestel, Wilfried Scheibe.

The hard part began when he and his friends realized that the band's standing would be augmented immensely by actually making music. The embryonic Losers not only lacked equipment, more severely they lacked talent.

Roland Arndt and Manfred Jestel had a bit of both. The two friends went to a school that shared a schoolyard with Willi Scheibe's. Naturally rumors of bands—in whatever evolutionary state—circulated freely. Willi knew that Roland and Manfred also had a band of sorts, the Shining Shapes. And he knew that young Jestel was an aspiring guitar player. "I heard the Beatles' 'She Loves You' on the radio and was hooked," says Jestel. "The sound was fresh and Lennon's and McCartney's harmonized voices gave the music more punch than anything I ever heard before."

He convinced his parents to buy him a cheap acoustic guitar for his 13th birthday and begged to be allowed to drop piano lessons in favor of guitar. Jestel was a quick learner. "After a few months I was able to play along with Beatles tunes. Not all the chords were correct, but I was good enough for people to recognize the songs."

And good enough to impress Scheibe. The singer lured Jestel over to the Losers. "They said, if I joined their band, they'd buy me this used Höfner guitar that was on display at one of the city's junk dealers," says Jestel. "Being 14 with little money, of course I agreed."

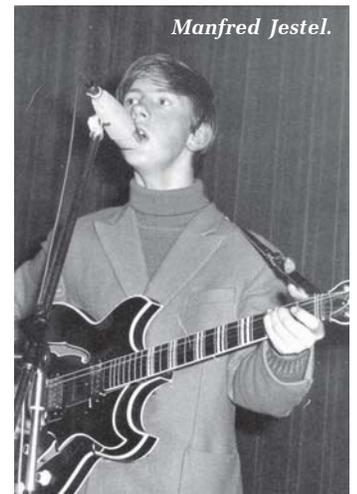
Left alone by his close friend, Arndt felt betrayed. He, too, spoke to Scheibe, and as he already owned an electric guitar and was able to read music from his own piano lessons, Arndt became a Loser, too. That was the end of the Shining Shapes and the birth of the Losers as an actual band.

Jestel never got his Höfner guitar, but the two new guitarists still kickstarted the band. That is, after Jestel taught the bass player Karl-Heinz Carstens a couple of basic bass lines. "Karl-Heinz had no musical training whatsoever. But he was our singer's best buddy. He loved music and the notion of being in a band, but he was less fond of practicing the instrument he was assigned to," says Arndt. So as the best musician in the band, it fell on Jestel to teach him.²

Once the band had a handful of Stones, Beatles and Kinks covers ready, they played their debut at a class party to mixed results. "A few

of the younger teachers welcomed us bringing in a bit of the new British sounds. One even asked us to perform at the next school party," remembers Arndt. While the older teachers were put off by the longer hair the five Losers had started to grow, their school fellows unanimously loved the band, remembers Arndt: "Our poor technique didn't matter at all. All our friends were excited about there being a band in town." Everybody tried to be a part of it: by carrying instruments to gigs, trying to set up gigs in nearby venues, taking pictures or acting as an unofficial security. Even practice sessions in the basement of the Arndt's were always well attended by friends and followers.

Word of Bad Oldesloe's youngest beat band began to spread in 1966. Not that there was much competition. The only other band in town doing the new thing, the Heartbeats, were a few years older. Bands from



Manfred Jestel.

neighboring small towns like the Jaguars from Reinfeld or the Jets from Trittau were more professional but stuck to their own scenes. Yet the beat sound kept getting more and more popular in Bad Oldesloe and the Losers setlist, comprised of an array of Stones, Beatles and, most numerous, Kinks numbers went down well with the younger audiences.

The hangout for Bad Oldesloe's beat scene was the small CC, short for Central Cafe, where songs such as "All Day and All of the Night" could ignite wild pogo-type dancing and the Losers played there often. However, more established bands like the Rattles or the Ger-

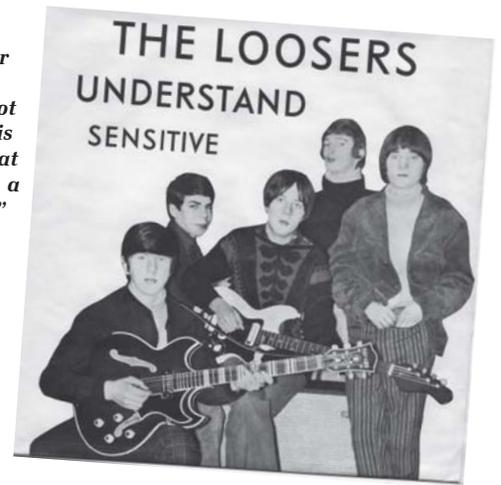


The bad boys of Bad Osloe, live in 1966. L to R: Roland Arndt, Manfred Jestel and Karl-Heinz Carstens



Left: The Mick Jagger fixation of singer Wilfried Scheibe is not really showing in this photo from a 1966 Beat Battle. "Live we were a well behaved band," says Jestel.

Right: The Loosers single.



man Bonds, from the lively scene of nearby Hamburg, played at the bigger Oldesloer Hof, a hotel with a huge hall that held upwards of 500 people. One day the Loosers, all being regular guests there, asked if they could play, too. Mr Voss, the booker, figured that the Loosers, being a local band with a lot of friends, could mean good business and agreed.

Now regularly drawing their friends and followers to gigs at Oldesloer Hof, the Loosers' popularity in their hometown grew. When Mr Voss organized a huge beat battle with eight regional bands including the Loosers, the five boys won in a landslide victory. "We got about 500 of the 550 votes," recalls Arndt, "partly because it was our friends who collected the ballots and they made sure the right band name was ticked!"

The undisputed highlight of the Loosers' live career however came later in the year. On October 16, 1966, they participated in the first Super Beat Festival. A battle of the bands hosted at Ostseehalle in the county's capital Kiel. According to official records, the three mark entrance fee was paid by nearly 4,000 teens, eight of which were arrested by the police for underage drinking and smoking. On the day LSD was banned in the US, the Loosers in Kiel were high on something completely legal: "We were in a trance when we went on stage," recalls Jestel. "The huge place, thousands of people, the hall buzzing with teen energy: It was mind-blowing for young boys like us!"

Sadly the gig sounded less mind-blowing to the jury. The first prize went to Chimes of Freedom, a Byrds-inspired folk-pop band from Kiel that one year later would feature German schlager-star Jürgen Drews. The Loosers however didn't miss much prize-wise: "The guitar amp we got as the winner wasn't very good at all," recalls Chimes of Free-

dom bass player Enrico Lombardi.

Not that the Loosers, always short on money, couldn't use improved equipment. "In the beginning our better amps were cheap mail-order models. The others were converted radios—we hung cloth over them to make them look like real amps," remembers rhythm guitarist Jestel. Members of the band worked for local farmers picking potatoes and strawberries, or sold magazines to patients at the hospital to earn cash for amps and better instruments. At the same time parental support was sparse for the underaged band project. "Being 14 when we started, my parents often demanded I'd be home by 10:00 at night—which meant, I'd miss the second part of our three-hour set," recalls Jestel. The drummer, being the same age, had an even stricter father and had to skip many a show. Arndt remembers: "Our gigs were always a gamble: Would everybody be allowed to go? Would we find somebody to drive us to the venue? Would the equipment stay in working order?"

The Loosers' long hair would cause additional problems. "Basically I had a convertible haircut," laughs Jestel. "At home, I had to comb it straight back and tuck it into the collar in the back to make it look shorter before my strict father. But as soon as I left the house it turned into a full-blown Beatle mop-top."

Things started to look much brighter for the Loosers when a certain Mr Dammann appeared. At least in the beginning. An older guy from Bad Oldesloe in his late thirties or early forties, Dammann was a self-made music entrepreneur. Realizing the market for a mid-size venue, he bought a huge tent which could fit 200 to 300 people and set up shows for popular beat acts such as the Liverbirds or schlager-singer Drafi Deutscher, and booked local bands as support acts. The Loosers were

one of them. The Jets from nearby Trittau another. Dammann offered both to become their manager. He wasn't short on promises, so both bands agreed. While the Jets were promised a support slot on the Walker Brothers' German tour in early summer of 1966 by Dammann, the prospect for the Loosers was more exotic. "He said, he'd fly us to Finland to appear on TV and play live there," remembers Manfred Jestel. Both bands were also told they'd have a record out in no time.

Word about the Loosers being on the brink of stardom spread immediately, according to Roland Arndt. "Of course we told our friends at school about this and it became the talk of the school soon after. Everybody asked, 'When's your record out? When are you going to Finland?'" Instead of asking "Why Finland?" the boys gazed at magazine photos of Mick Jagger and Keith Richards leaving an aircraft and imagined this would soon be them. "It felt like a dream, and we were naive enough to believe it," admits Arndt. But it wasn't going to be a

dream with a happy ending.

To be fair, Dammann was no crook. He managed to arrange a recording date for both bands at the Teldec studio in Hamburg. Yes, a single date. Both the Loosers and the Jets were booked on the same date for half a day. "Of course we imagined there'd be somebody from the label, a producer to take us by the hand," recalls Arndt. But the only other person in the studio was a sound engineer. "He rushed us through a handful of live takes of our two tracks and after a couple of hours we were done."

Recording one of their cover versions was not an option for the Loosers. As they only had two original tunes, there wasn't much discussion. Still, "Understand," written by Jestel and inspired by Herbie Mann's "Comin' Home Babe," was a bold choice for the A-side. The descending moody melody and tempo changes were not obvious dance floor fodder. The "boy left girl" lyrics, written by singer Willi Scheibe's sister, told an existential tale of despair. But it stood out on the genre-building *Prae-Kraut Pandaemonium* comp series that introduced the Loosers to a new audience in the '90s. This wasn't your usual copycat Kraut beat tune. It had a stark seriousness that sounded unique. The Arndt-penned flipside, "Sensitive," was only marginally more poppy. Moody in tone again and with tempo stops that killed any possibility of dance floor popularity. In short, a great double-sider with only marginal commercial potential.

Back in Bad Oldesloe, the Loosers would have to wait a while before they found out for themselves how their 45 sounded. "People kept asking us, but nothing happened for weeks," recalls lead guitarist Arndt. "So one day I called the Teldec people, asking when we could expect our record. They said: 'Well, as soon as you pay the bill.'" It turned



Roland and Manfred, 1966.



out that Dammann had neither managed to get his bands signed to Teldec nor did he pay for the recording. Instead he had disappeared from the scene, taking with him the dream of screaming Loosers fans on Finnish TV. The boys were shattered.

In the end Roland Arndt's father footed the bill. "We sat down and figured out how much money there'd be if we sold all 500 copies. My dad calculated that he'd quickly recoup his investment, and then get his son's band some cash," says Arndt.

But by the time the pressing—in a minimal, one-sided sleeve—finally arrived, the Loosermania in Bad Oldesloe had largely died down. "People seemed turned off by the delay of our record and the cancellation of the Finland trip," remembers Jestel. "The buzz was gone."

This combined with a severe lack of promotion meant the 45 wasn't exactly a hot seller. The band barely sold half the pressing. Father Arndt's business plan was not on track. Remaining copies were given away or lost over the years, making the Loosers 45 a scarce and sought-after title in the *Prae-Kraut* pantheon today. Arndt and Jestel were completely oblivious to the late cult fame their single has gathered in certain circles, until the late '90s when writer Hans-Jürgen Klitsch contacted both of them while researching his ground-breaking *Shakin' All Over* book on German beat bands.

By the end of 1966, after a turbulent year full of victories and losses, the Loosers started to fall apart. The parents of Thomas Kirsch, the 15-year-old drummer, took their boy out of the band to have him focus on school. Bass player Karl-Heinz Carstens also left. But the rest soldiered bravely on for a while. By early 1967 the Loosers had regrouped as a four-piece with a new drummer and Manfred Jestel

switching from lead guitar to bass. "At first I didn't like the idea of playing bass," says Jestel, "but when we took on songs such as 'My Generation' with its extroverted bass part I started to grow fond of the instrument."

The band diary for 1967 shows that new lineup still playing regularly in the region. But later in the year things started to change. "In late 1967 we realized that it was getting harder for us to get gigs," says Jestel. "New places like the Club 68 in Bad Oldesloe opened that just had DJs and no live acts." At the same time, the music changed, as Arndt remembers: "I bought the Beatles *Sgt Pepper's* album upon release in the summer of 1967, took it home and together with Manfred played it over and over again while we were lying on the floor. It was like a new musical world opening up. Especially for Manfred, he seemed fully mesmerized by all the ideas and possibilities."

This new world wasn't made for the Loosers. In the fall, the band finally fizzled out without officially breaking up. But for Manfred Jestel the gift of music never faded. After a number of other bands he got into jazz and to this day works as a professional musician playing bass with the Bop Cats. Roland Arndt hardly plays music anymore but still wouldn't want to miss the two years as a Looser: "That time lives on as a treasure chest within me."



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