

GYPSY BOY

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A WOLF MOON MIGHT BE HANGING HUGE TONIGHT OVER CHALKY MOUNTAINS CRUMBLING INTO THE DUSK, BUT SOMERSET WEST – OR THE WILD WEST AS IT’S SOMETIMES CALLED – AIN’T COWBOY COUNTRY.

Neat houses, marzipan-coloured in the pastel light, stand like petit fours on the tiered hillside, pensioners are out on evening strolls... No, this ain't cowboy country. But, as Piet Botha says, he ain't no cowboy.

He's a gypsy. A suburban troubadour, staying for the moment with sometime-bandmates Arthur and Rudi Dennis in a house set back from the road. A beat-up VW bus and a dugout canoe clutter the driveway. Inside, the light is low, there's a painting of Neil Young, a room full of guitars and a kitten called Carmelita. Piet Botha sits at an outdoor table furnished with a bottle of wine, one hand busy with a pipe, the other rattling together bits of coloured glass ("magic stones") like lucky dice.

“WE DON'T GIVE A SHIT. WE'VE GOT THE BEST LIFE – OUT OF THE SYSTEM.”

A long-time legend, his story filters in and out of the South African music scene: from starting out "in a pub, with acoustic guitars playing Bob Dylan songs way back in '74", to touring with his band, Jack Hammer and forming The Lyzrdyrd Kyngs with the Dennis brothers. "You go from one band to another band and another band and eventually it's just the road," he says with a voice like worn leather, "and then you end up somewhere."

Soon he'll be hitting the road again with erstwhile-East Berlin anti-establishmentarians, Freygang Band as part of the Black Sheep Rockconspiracy Tour. Started by André Greneir-Pol in the late 70s, Freygang (as it was then known) were part of the attempt to draw back the communist iron curtain. They ended up in jail, slapped with a life ban. Once out, they continued anyway, playing under pseudonyms, lyrics on the line between outright anti-government and poetically humanist. After Greneir-Pol died in 2008, kraut-punk singer Tatjana Bresson took over fronting the group and the Freygang Band continues this tradition today.

The BSR Tour is the brainchild of Killian Nestler, a former manager of Freygang. After meeting Piet he recognised the parallels between the challenges East German bands had faced and those experienced by artists in apartheid-era South Africa.

Piet's idea of fighting the system is more embedded in the process of making and playing music with likeminded souls. "Woodstock was kind of like a benchmark for us. To see that happening, you know, that was kind of like, OK, here's a bunch of youngsters who can take on the system. Actually take it on, and the system had to take notice of this – the music was so powerful. It was a fantastic time," his slow cadence quickens tempo as he talks, fired up by his subject. "The sixties were wonderful. Spirit of rebellion against the status quo, you know. And it lasted for a while. And then boom. The bankers and the lawyers and the accountants figured out, well, let's make money out of this revolution, you know. And that was the end of the revolution, see..." He trails off, the quickbeat of words becoming the fall of acorns on the roof. Ominous. Christ, does he think the revolution's over?

"No, never!" he laughs. "It's probably in recess. But what's going on in the world is so crazy. Sometimes I don't even get it, you know. The new thing with the technology is that it's very good for getting the truth out there. But will the truth ever be shown? There's going to be some really huge upheavals. There's always murmurings...little bit here, little bit there...eventually, I'm sure, there're going to be some changes..." But what those changes might be he doesn't say.

Instead, he explains his nomadic, rather than gun-slinging, impulse in the context of anti-establishmentarianism: "We don't give a shit. We've got the best life – out of the system."

Out of the system. On the road. How does Piet Botha fit into the context of the underground and the anti-government that surrounds the Black Sheep Rockconspiracy Tour and is seemingly part of its aim of cultural exchange? Although he knew Koos Kombuis and Johannes Kerkorrel, Piet was never part of Vöelvy, in fact he's almost dismissive of the '80s musical movement: "The struggle wasn't for the oppressed, it was their struggle against the government because there was so much censorship and stuff... they drew a lot of attention, but there was never one black musician in that whole movement!" Rather, Piet hung out with "the artists, you know, the guys that could paint and sculpt because they've got a different way to look at life." Furthermore, despite some of his albums being in Afrikaans, he doesn't see his use of the language as weighted: "Getting nationalistic about anything scares me. I just see swastikas. So I'd actually love to sing in Spanish or Swahili if one could... find the metre, the rhythm... that would

be good." The metre, the rhythm... Piet Botha sounds like Jack Kerouac. And again, we're back to the road. And still stuck at the question of how Piet fits into South African anti-establishment music history and, currently, the Rockconspiracy tour.

And maybe the answer is the road... For political theorist, Achille Mbembe, "power that works against the state is essentially masochistic; the only way to avoid the destructive codification of the state upon the body is to will one's pain and to accept it as a form of enjoyment." Piet Botha is a gypsy, always on the road, and it is this rootlessness, constant wandering and continual upheaval that has allowed him to continue to perform for decades and remain a symbol of hope for other musicians – maybe not as an anti-government agent (that time in history has perhaps passed), but as a force against those corporations that would milk money from the free-spirited. So, Piet Botha will the pain of the rootless upon himself and accepts it as a form of enjoyment: a "gypsy boy...out on the road that has no end".

See Piet Botha & Akkedis join the Freygang Band on their South African tour at the following locations:

When and Where!?

BLACK SHEEP ROCKCONSPIRACY TOUR

22-26 May - STRAB Festival (Mozam)

30 May - JHB – The Radium Beer Hall

31 May - PTA - Cafe Barcelona

01 June - BLOEM - Binoway Festival

4 June - KNYSNA - Zanzibar

6 June - STELLENBOSCH - Dorpstraat Theatre

7 June - CAPE TOWN - Mercury

8 June - BOTRIVIER HOTEL

For full tour details visit

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