

History of Rock n Roll - AnnenMayKantereit: „Schlagschatten“ - An album review by Lilli Wollner



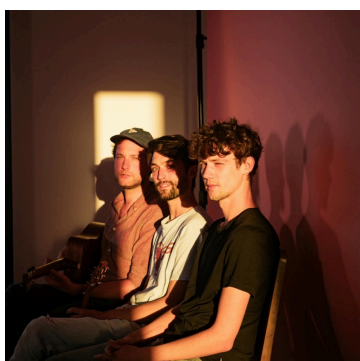
The band was formed by Christopher Annen as guitar player, Henning May as lead singer and piano player and Severin Kantereit on the drums in 2011. They met at Schiller high school in Cologne and started off as street musicians. During a Jam session on the University campus, they got to meet Lars Lötgering, who would become their bassist for the following three years. From 2014 to 2020, Malte Huck was bassist

of the group, also working effectively on the album with them. However, during a Live tour in 2020, he announced the breakup from the band. Even though he is missed by the fans, the leaving of Huck made it possible for the band to, for the first time, get a woman into their group. On the current tour, Sophie Chassée plays bass for the band. Moreover, Ferdinand Schwarz accompanies the band since 2014 as a trumpet player on tour.

AnnenMayKantereit is known for

Henning May's very deep and moving voice. The music would be described as alternative pop and rock. Main themes of their songs are relationships, loss, and, sometimes hidden, social criticism.

Their national breakthrough in Germany they had with their first album *Alles nix konkretes*, especially the songs *Pocahontas* (which has reached 99 million streams on Spotify), *Oft gefragt* and *Barfuß am Klavier*. Their international breakthrough happened with their version of "Tom's Diner", recorded with the, also German, Giant Rooks. It was released in 2019 and has over 96 million streams on Spotify.



Even though the founding members have been together for eleven years now, the only singing in their songs is done by May and there are no backup vocals, which is rather uncommon. However, due to Henning May's unique and distinctive voice and the band's great instrumental features it does not feel like there is anything missing.

AnnenMayKantereit's lyrics are known to be very metaphorical and can often be interpreted on a deeper level than it seems at first. Oftentimes, the real meaning of their songs is hard to understand and is only hinted at through single lines. The band is also known to use a lot of wordplays, puns and other stylistic devices in their songs.

The album I am going to talk about, Schlagschatten, contains 14 songs and is completely in German.

Even though their debut album had big hits on it, critics complained about it being not diverse enough and the songs just all sounding the same. And so the band decided to go from the Berlin Hansa Studios to a small town in Spain to work on their next project. Knowing this, I feel like there are some instrumental elements that really reflect this and the whole album seems just kind of 'unforced' to me and definitely has some huge differences to the first one.

Special about the album is also that there is a music video / promotional video for every single song. And on their YouTube channel, there even is a video documentary about the development of the album.

Many of my personal favorite songs are on this album; "Sieben Jahre" always makes me very emotional, "Alle Fragen" gives me chills, and so does "Weiße Wand", but for different reasons, which I will discuss further later.

<https://youtu.be/ybr6z5EgCJM>

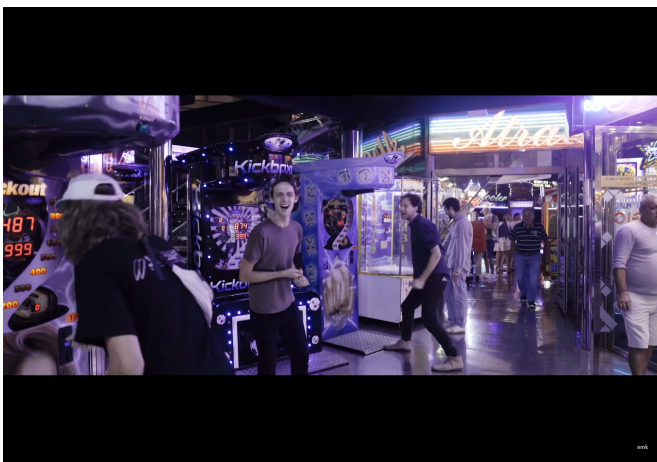
The opening song, *Marie*, is mainly about the loss of a loved one, but, in a sense, also portrays the feeling of being in love. It opens the album with the iconic first lines:

"The birds are shitting from the sky
And I'm watching it"

In the chorus, Henning May sings, in a piercing voice: *Marie, where are you?*, which is likely to refer to a significant other that the narrator misses. In this song, there are also many references to May's private life, like to his mother leaving the family when he was still a child, which makes the song really personal.

"My best friend died way too young
And for so long I do not have a mother anymore"

The first part of the song's second verse is an adaption of the poem *Der Panther* by Rainer Maria Rilke, only the word 'bars', which refers to a cage in which the panther in the poem is trapped in, is replaced by 'cities', but the idea of being trapped in a situation or place stays the same. I absolutely love this and when I first discovered the resemblance, it made me like the song even more.



The songs *Nur wegen dir* (2nd), *In meinem Bett* (3rd) and *Vielleicht Vielleicht* (13th) are positive love songs that describe the emotion of being in love and all the good things, thoughts and feelings that come with it. A direct contrast to that is the 12th song of the album, *Du bist anders*, which deals with uncertainty of the narrator because their partner is acting differently and not giving a reason for that. It brings up thoughts of jealousy, frustration and self-doubt. It is one of my favorite songs of the album due to the guitar, which is very calm in the beginning and builds up to a faster tempo in the chorus and towards the end.

(In order: <https://youtu.be/gCvusLUDBZo>, <https://youtu.be/D0j-pSjlgls>, https://youtu.be/OG5h6Lpn_qM, https://youtu.be/tuSM_AmN41o)

<https://youtu.be/mVOMY5jXNHU>

Ich geh heut nicht mehr tanzen starts off as a song about not wanting to go out and dance even though having told your friends you would do so and is therefore often misinterpreted as a party

song. As the song marches on, the lyrics get darker and reveal that the protagonist actually has to deal with feelings of depression. With the line “I think I’m going smoke plants today”, an excessive drug use is also hinted at.

“And because I’m tired
Tired, tired, tired”

“The boys with revolvers (referring to a western movie)
help forgetting
That one drinks to forget”

“My stomach tells me I have to eat something
I’ve been living off of leftovers for weeks”

“I’m still waiting to be able to feel again”

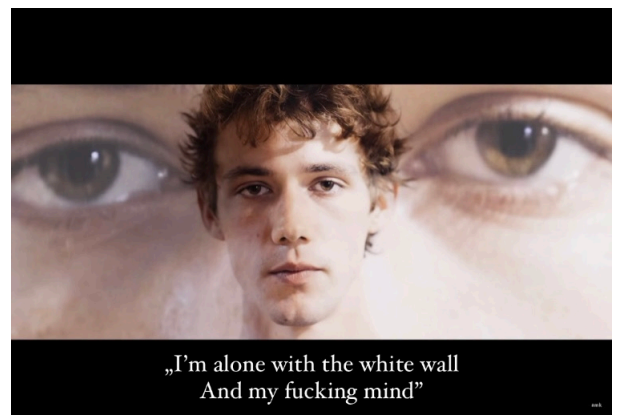


https://youtu.be/UbR6BGB_f5Y

Weißer Wand is probably one of my favorite political German songs and a big breakaway from AnnenMayKantereit’s usual song themes. It starts off with a very deep, piercing bass sound (28 second intro of just the bass riff) that runs through the whole song. Instrumentally, only drums and a few other instrumental notes are added, giving the song a very dark atmosphere. The lyrics are written from the perspective of a white, young, German person. While the narrator complains about his situation, his actual privileges show and several political and social issues in Germany are being revealed.

“I’m driving black in a white country
Although I can afford the trip”

‘Driving black’ is the German expression for fare-dodging. With ‘white country’, the band refers to Germany and its overly white population. By saying that he could actually afford the trip but still does not pay for a ticket, one of the privileges of the narrator is already shown in the first lines, because there are a lot of people in Germany that get on public transport without buying a ticket because it is too expensive and they cannot afford it, but then there are also those who could afford it but still do not (like the person in the song). Still, oftentimes the blame gets put on the first group of people.



After this, the lyrics become more straight forward and intense:

“And I look at the headlines
And something has stuck with me
Refugee crisis feels like Reichstag fire
Even though I cannot compare that”

This line actually gets me every single time because it just hits so close to home.

On January 27, 1933, the German Reichstag was set on fire by unknown arsonists. Two days later, Adolf Hitler was appointed Reich chancellor and laws were passed that helped the Nazis gain power. Nowadays, it is suspected that the Nazis planned the fire to get their own advantages out of it. Still, a fire in the Reichstag was (ironically when you look at the consequences) perceived as a huge attack on the German population and democracy.

In Germany, there is still a lot of very conservative, patriotic and right-winged people, and due to Germany’s history, that is a big problem. During the Syrian refugee crisis, Germany took in a lot of refugees (they were the fourth-largest refugee-hosting country, right after Syria’s neighbors) which had a big social impact, and caused mainly unhappy or frustrated public reactions. Right-winged

groups took that as a chance to rise up. There were a lot of attacks on foreign-looking people all over the country and refugee homes were even set on fire, which was all over the news at the time. This line refers to that; for many of those self-proclaimed 'patriots', the crisis must have looked as threatening as arson in the parliament, otherwise they wouldn't have reacted so violently.

A few lines later, the narrator of the song admits that he is "none of those that know what to do / To be honest, I never get shit done myself". In my opinion, this is a very powerful line, because it shows that typical thing that the people this song calls out do when they are unhappy: Put the blame on someone else and demand better opportunities for themselves while not doing anything and not even knowing what exactly they want.

The last line I want to look into is:

"I'm driving black in a white country
That cannot be travelled with any passport"

First of all, I like it when songs repeat the same lines but vary them, and AnnenMayKantereit does that a lot. Second of all: Wow. Again: Such a powerful line in such a powerful song. Not only does it refer back to the way refugees and foreign people are not welcomed into the country, but it also shows another privilege that the narrator is obviously not even aware of.

Making especially the last point clear, the song ends with the words:

"And everyone knows that it's (the wall) white
Everyone knows"

Everyone can see his privilege and his ignorance, except for himself. Damn.

The following song starts off with a similar vibe to it, but at the beginning of the first chorus, the dark piano melody changes to a bouncing, almost happy-sounding beat. The lyrics are quite dark, but not in a political way like before.

<https://youtu.be/fhu5EtRCtO8>

Hinter klugen Sätzen deals with personal fear, uncertainty, loneliness and change, mainly of oneself. It is a song of confusion, and I absolutely love it.



"I am not good at ending things
And I want to waste time
And do not know how yet"

My favorite line by far is:

"And I have a longing without end
Longing for the strange
Because I have become a stranger to myself"

It just always makes me want to shout it from the top of my lungs because it is such a lyrical masterpiece to me.

"And I don't notice that I like to bet
And always bet everything
Because I want to lose"

"I am scared to love"

Always only doubting
Failure in the back of my head
Because everything fades at some point”

But if you think it cannot get any sadder, let me introduce to you the next and my first favorite song from AnnenMayKantereit:

Sieben Jahre. <https://youtu.be/k4y1SObhPyQ>
Now where shall I start on this one? I don't even know. Let me just dive right into it.

The song is written in C-Major and uses a lot of Minor chords, making it *very* melancholic and sad. The song opens with the question:

“You're still asking yourself
What if?”

And continues with

“And then you think for a few seconds
That she's still here”,

revealing it to be a breakup song.

In the next line, the song reveals that the person and his ex-girlfriend have not seen each other in seven years, but that what had been is still beautiful for him, hinting at the fact that he still loves her.

Then the bridge sets in and the soft, calm guitar sound is replaced by a more determined strumming. The lyrics match this change perfectly well:



“You want to go out on the big sea again
Because you realize that it goes on for you”

The protagonist seems to come to the realization that he has to get over it and go out to date other people again, because life goes on.

But then, in only two lines, the truth is revealed:
“And you are still talking so much about her
When she has been gone for seven years.”

In the original, German text, the lyrics make it even more certain that the girl the protagonist is mourning about has not broken up with him, but has actually died seven years ago.

For other people, this might have been more obvious throughout the song, but when I listened to it first, this completely changed the whole meaning for me because I had thought it the whole time to be just a breakup song. Now, when I listen to it, I always wait for this part to come on and it still hits me every time.

After this package of emotional damage, I can happily say that the next track on the album gives off a very positive and happy feeling and is even known as a party song.



<https://youtu.be/DmqmO7S1lio>

Jenny Jenny is a song about a flight attendant. Even though the lyrics stress the downsides of her working life and are therefore not as happy as you would think, the little interludes of Henning May playing the ukulele make up for it. ;)

“The day begins in the mirror
Tired eyes are being ‘makeup-ed’ awake”

“She says she would like to be permanently
employed so much
She says, the world is smaller when you fly
everyday”

“Jenny, Jenny, cloud surfer, just always keeps on smiling
Like all flight attendants do
Jenny, cloud surfer”

“And then a three hour stay
And Jenny drinks the coffee cold”

Then, there is a reference to a very popular children’s book by Janosch, a famous author. ‘Oh, how beautiful is Panama’ is about a tiger and a bear that live an uneventful life, but then, one day, decide to go on an adventure to find Panama, because it is said to be the place where all your dreams come true. This can easily be adapted to this situation; Jenny is longing for a place like Panama.

“She says sometimes she comes home
And does not remember from where”

The next song, in my mind, has a similar buildup as *Seven Years* and therefore catches me just the same. It is my absolute favorite from the album. <https://youtu.be/FRPz3UVxTng>

The song title *Alle Fragen* is ambiguous: On the one hand, and in the context of the song, it means ‘Everyone’s asking’, but AnnenMayKantereit takes grammar very seriously in their song titles and in German, verbs are not capitalized, only nouns are. Therefore, it would mean ‘All the questions’.

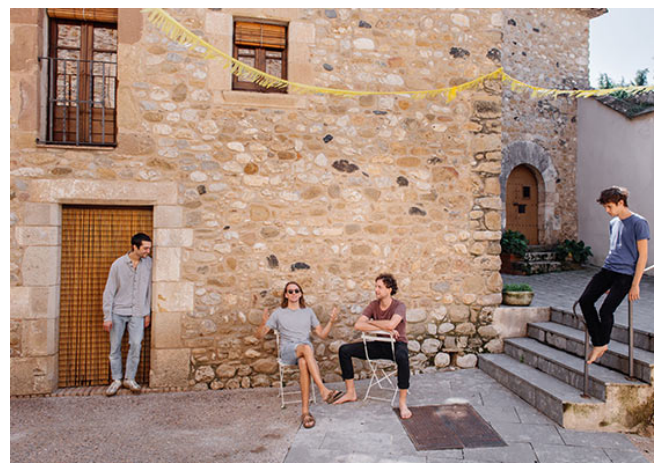
I am sure AnnenMayKantereit did this on purpose, but whatever you call it, it is a damn good song.

The lyrics are about coming back to your home town, and I find it absolutely mind blowing how well the music captures this melancholic feeling.

“You are driving home
And everything somehow becomes quieter
And somehow smaller”

At this point, I just need to cite the whole chorus, because translating it, it becomes even more clear how well it captures the emotions that come with returning home to a place after a long time.

“The first thing you notice when you finally arrive
Is the past
The second thing you notice when you then look
around
Is change
The third thing you notice when you get out of the



car
Is that you're alone"

The next lines give an insight into what the protagonist really associates with the place:

"You haven't been here in forever
And the last time with her"

He seems to have been to this place with a loved one, presumably his girlfriend, but based on the fact that he is now there alone, they are probably not together anymore.

This gets confirmed towards the end, when the enumeration in the chorus is added to by:

"The last thing you notice is
That you still miss her"



The ultimate buildup this song offers happens right after that, when the bass and guitar change to a fast, tense strumming and May sings:

"And everybody's asking you about her
Everybody's asking"

The whole song combines the instrumental and lyrical part together so perfectly and there are even more details in the text than I talked about here, so it is definitely worth a listen.

Getting towards the end of my album review, there is one song I would like to take a closer look into: *Schon krass*. <https://youtu.be/X7ZSYjV27s>

It was first released as a different, lyrically more vague version, which is still the one that is in the YouTube music video.

I like the new version better and the lyrics also show more clearly what it is actually about:

Excessive drug use. If it was for me, I would definitely put the whole text in here, because it is just such a lyrical masterpiece and the topic makes you really think.

"But I think on the way up
There are drugs everywhere"

"You know, I know how much it weighs
When it's laying in front of me
Or where to get it when you love it so much
That there's no day without anymore"

"I don't know when the last time was
I thought of it sober and thought I could
Maybe leave all of this behind someday
And then start over new"



<https://youtu.be/XOP--GeLXZk>

The album finishes with the title song *Schlagschatten*. It is a very calm song. The lyrics are mix of a detailed description of a train ride and the thoughts that come up during that.



“I want to count cards
And smoke one
And start to turn my fate
Why are the tears running from my eyes
Although I’m not thinking of anyone?”

I want to start by saying I appreciate the band so much and I would love for at least some of you to just give the album a listen, it is really worth it and you do not have to speak German to enjoy Henning’s voice.

Other than the debut, this album was overall approved by the critics:

“Schlagschatten can flaunt with 14 songs, of which actually not a single one is too much or unnecessary, because the individual tracks are all different from each other, at least sonically.”
A harsh but very true comment by the radio channel ego fm

This is the album that really got me listening to AnnenMayKantereit and I am so thankful for it because it is such a great addition to my usually rather little German repertoire. On this album, there are really songs for any type of person, for any mood and for any life situation. I hope you will enjoy it just as much!

I give *Schlagschatten* a 9/10, because it is a great album and the songs work well together, but, of course it is not perfect and there is a few songs that I just do not like as much as others. Still, one of my absolute favorites and a lyrical masterpiece!

