

MICHAEL KUNZE

Biography

Michael Kunze was born on November 9, 1943 in Prague Czechoslovakia. His father was a journalist on the legendary *Prager Tagblatt*, his mother an actress. Both of them were of Austrian extraction.

Michael spent his childhood and early schooldays on the edge of the Black Forest in the West German town of Freiburg im Breisgau. In 1954, the family moved to Stuttgart, and in 1959 from there to Munich. Michael attended secondary school in both these cities.

At the tender age of eight, he started writing a newspaper for his contemporaries, "publishing" it with carbon paper. Later in Stuttgart, this urge was turned into a monthly magazine for young people, with a mimeographed edition of some 100 copies. In addition to this activity, Michael staged several of his own plays for school presentations. Then the fourteen year old fell victim to Rock'n Roll fever. He learned to play the guitar and became an Elvis Presley fan.

But his high school activities were largely based on the study of Latin, history and German literature (his favorite subjects). Still, he managed to find time to found and conduct a vocal trio that performed in the style of his idols of the day, the *Kingston Trio*. He also organized benefit concerts. It was about at this point in his life that he started writing song lyrics, some of them in Latin.

On the school bus he met seventeen-year-old Roswitha Wussow. Five years later this teenage romance became both a marriage and a professional partnership, which has continued to flourish on all fronts despite all the usual customs of show business couples.

In those days, Michael Kunze wanted to become "politician, monk or philosophy professor", perhaps even a journalist like his father. His A-average high school grades indicated no given direction. He seemed to be brilliant in everything he did. Due to his A-grade graduation - he actually got the highest degree of all Bavarian graduates of 1964 - he received scholarships both from the *Educational Foundation of the German People* and *The Maximilianeum Foundation*. He finally decided to study law.

From 1964 to 1968 he attended the *Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität* in Munich and concluded his legal studies by passing the bar examination. He started work as a law clerk at juvenile court, but, discovering he didn't have what it took to practice law, he interrupted his clerking period. Out of sheer interest, he studied for three more years philosophy and history under, among others, Dieter Henrich and Thomas Nipperdey.

Meanwhile his first lyrics had begun being recorded. The Hamburg folklore group, *City Preachers*, recorded an LP with songs Michael had written during his student days. The record was anything but a commercial success, but it made the music business aware of Michael Kunze. The Berlin music publisher Peter Meisel and a young composer in Munich named Ralph Siegel both wanted to collaborate with him.

But real success didn't set in until Kunze decided to produce his own songs. He and his wife went out in quest of an up-and-coming pop singer, and finally discovered Peter Maffay in a folk club in the Autumn of 1969. The first song Kunze produced with the 17-year-old newcomer was called *Du (You)* and topped the German charts in the summer of 1970.

Kunze began adding other luminaries to his stable of soloists. He produced records with Michael Schanze, Marion Maerz, Caterina Valente, Lulu and Mary Roos. Several concept albums which came out at this time demonstrate Kunze's fondness for using music-dramatic forms in pop song lyrics.

Among the Kunze songs which became hits in Germany during the 1970's were *Griechischer Wein (Greek Wine)* (sung by Udo Jürgens), *Die kleine Kneipe (The little Tavern)* (Peter Alexander), *Ein Bett im Kornfeld (A Bed in the Wheat Field)* (Jürgen Drews) and quite a few other wellknown titles.

The increasing dominance of Anglo-American songs on the German hit parades prompted Michael Kunze to venture an experiment designed to prove the test-tube character of the so-called "disco music". He invented an imaginary group he called *Silver Convention* and produced an album with music made up largely of bass riffs, string phrases and simple, repeated English lyrics.

The album, entitled *Save me* and the single *Fly, Robin, Fly* became international hits. In the U.S.A. both the album and the single hit the top of both the *Billboard* and *Cashbox* charts. The "group", represented by composer Sylvester Levay and producer/lyricist Michael Kunze, was the first German aggregation to win the coveted *Grammy*. Kunze told a reporter at the time, he felt like he'd just "sold Coca Cola to the Americans".

Based on his spectacular success in the U.S. - after *Fly, Robin, Fly* came such hits as *Lady Bump* and *Get up and Boogie* - Kunze worked together with a number of American artists. He produced albums with a vast and varied array of performers, including Herbie Mann, Julio Iglesias and Sister Sledge. In Germany the First Television Program's *Golden Europe* Jury elected him as "Man of the Year 1976". But the recording industry expected he would keep coming up with spin-offs of his success recipe, meanwhile labeled *Munich Sound*. For a long time Kunze commuted back and forth between Germany and the United States, trying to meet these expectations. Then, more or less over night, he decided to let the music industry go fry ice.

At the end of the seventies he declared that *Silver Convention* had been adjourned and decided to discontinue producing records.

For one year, he took a breather from show business and completed work on the legal history dissertation he had started as a student. It dealt with a number of documents concerning a witch trial held in 1600. Kunze's treatise (The Pappenheimer Trial), was largely devoted to an analysis of a "jurisprudential logic" he rejected, which seeks to cite reason and authority to justify the commission of atrocities. Basing his work on the argumentation of selfconfident lawyers during the persecution of the nonexistent crime of witchcraft, he shed light on the dubious nature of alleged jurisprudential thinking. His dissertation attracted considerable attention in legal circles and was awarded the 1981 Faculty Prize from the Munich University Law School plus a "summa cum laude" citation.

Professionally Michael Kunze worked exclusively as lyricist, working for such international celebrities as Greece's Nana Mouskouri, Austrian Udo Jürgens, American Sister Sledge, German Penny McLean and the French masters, Gilbert Becaud and Charles Aznavour. At the start of the Eighties he developed a successful concept for Gitte Haenning, which turned a one-dime Danish teeny-bopper into a mature song stylist to be taken seriously, and adding songs like *Ich will alles (I Want it All)*, *Freu Dich nicht zu früh! (Don't Get Too Happy Too Soon)* and *Etwas ist geschehen mit mir (Something's been Happening to Me)* to her repertoire. Michael Kunze helped the pop group *Münchener Freiheit* make a breakthrough a couple of years later with a tune called *Ohne dich schlaf ich heut Nacht nicht ein (I Can't Sleep Tonight Without You)*. He has written an uninterrupted chain of hits for

songstress Juliane Werding starting in 1985 among them *Stimmen im Wind* (Voices in the Wind) and *Sehnsucht ist unheilbar* (There's no Cure for Longing).

In the Eighties, the musical began making its way into the center of Michael Kunze's musical activity. Back in 1979, he translated Tim Rice's lyrics for the Andrew-Lloyd-Webber musical *Evita* for a presentation at Vienna's Theater an der Wien, a theatre which had once seen the premieres of such masterpieces as Beethoven's "Fidelio". His collaboration on this production with the legendary producer-director Harold Prince helped him rediscover a love for theatre which went back to his childhood. The success of the first translation set the pace for a number of other adaptations. His German version of *Cats* ran for seven years in Vienna, making it one of the greatest hits of all times in that city. The numerous other musicals Kunze has translated include *The Phantom of the Opera*, *A Chorus Line*, *Song and Dance*, *Into the Woods*, *Follies*, *Assassins*, *Side by Side* by Sondheim, *Dorian Gray*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Aspects Of Love*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Kiss Of The Spider Woman*, *The Hunchback Of Notre Dame*, *The Lion King*, *Mamma Mia!* and *Aida*.

In 1982, Michael Kunze adapted his dissertation into a narrative non-fiction book called *Strasse ins Feuer* (Highroad to the Stake). The book became a best-seller in Germany and was translated into several languages. After seven years of research Kunze published another historic novel in 1990, entitled *Der Freiheit eine Gasse* (A Pathway for Freedom) using the example of the German revolutionary Gustav Struve to illustrate the history of the fight for Democracy in the Germany of 1848.

When he stopped producing records, Michael Kunze also started working for television. He has conceived and written a number of 90-Minute Shows for the major German and Austrian networks (*Liebe ist ...*/ZDF, *Sport Gala*/ARD, *Weil wir leben wollen* /ZDF) and developed the ARD Series *Showgeschichten*. In 1991 he conceived the international *Peter Ustinov Gala* in Paris celebrating Sir Peter Ustinov's 70th birthday starring Sir Yehudin Menuhin, Klaus Maria Brandauer, Petula Clark, Tony Curtis and Monserrat Caballe. With the annual *Bambi Award Gala* he created the German counterpart to the American Academy Award presentation. His once-a-year special, *Die Peter-Alexander-Show*, starring Germany's top musical entertainer, Peter Alexander, and, among others, Richard Chamberlain, Joan Collins and Liza Minelli (ORF) reached cult status in the 90's. He also conceived *Der Goldene Löwe*, the German counterpart to the American Emmy Awards Show.

Over the years, Michael has written a number of articles and given interviews (*Stern*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, *ZEIT-Magazin*, *Playboy*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*), exploring his views on the function of entertainment in society and the media issues therunto appertaining. Michael Kunze devoted the 1990s to the writing of original musicals. His first original show, *Hexen, Hexen* (Witches, Witches), was performed during this Summer season 1991 in Heilbronn commemorating the city's 800th Anniversary (music: Sylvester Levay). It received excellent reviews and was a big box office success, drawing an audience of sixty thousand during its limited run.

In September 1992, his musical ELISABETH, about the life of the Empress Elisabeth of Austria, opened at Vienna's prestigious "Theater an der Wien" (music: Sylvester Levay; director: Harry Kupfer, production designer: Hans Schavernoch). The show ran in Vienna for almost six years and is regarded as the re-birth of the contemporary continental musical theater in Europe. A Japanese production of ELISABETH is running in Toky and Tagarazuka since more than 20 years.

Collaborating with Roman Polanski (director) and Jim Steinman (composer), Michael wrote his first English libretto and lyrics for the musical, DANCE OF THE VAMPIRES. A German version opened in October 1997 at the Viennese Raimund Theater to raving reviews. It premiered in Stuttgart/Germany on March 3, 2000, where it was a box office phenomenon

and became a cult. In 2002/2003 a totally "Americanized" DANCE OF THE VAMPIRES played on Broadway, starring Michael Crawford. The original version was transferred to Hamburg/Germany in November 2003 and premiered there (Neue Flora Theater) on December 7, 2003.

Michael's next show, MOZART! (music: Sylvester Levay; director: Harry Kupfer), opened in October 1999 again in Vienna ("Theater an der Wien"). TIME Magazine raved about the "affecting libretto" and Michael's "strikingly theatrical invention", the show being his "third straight successful production". MOZART! has become another international success, with additional productions in cities such as Hamburg/Germany, Karlstad/Sweden, Tokyo/Japan, Seoul/Korea and many more. His first opera, RAOUL, about Raoul Wallenberg who saved more than a hundred thousand Jews from the holocaust (music: Gershon Kingsley), opened in Bremen/Germany and was also performed in Szeged/Hungary.

REBECCA, a musical based on Daphne DuMaurier's novel, with music by Sylvester Levay became an instant success in Europe, played in Hungary, Sweden, Japan, and is a smash hit in Korea. His next shows, MARIE ANTOINETTE and LADY BESS (both written with Sylvester Levay) opened first in Japan, from where they travelled to Korea and Europe. Lately he has created a musical based on the Italian short stories about DON CAMILLO & PEPPONE and a show about the conquest of the MATTERHORN which just opened in Switzerland. He is currently preparing a musical about BEETHOVEN using the composer's original melodies.

Michael also wrote three choir oratorios which have been performed by more than 2000 voices in huge concert halls in Germany. Music for THE TEN COMMANDMENTS, LUTHER and BETHLEHEM was written by Dieter Falk.

Michael and Roswitha Kunze have a son (Stephan) and a grandson. They live in Hamburg/Germany. Michael, who holds a U.S. green card, is a member of GEMA, Deutsche Dramatiker Union and The Dramatists Guild, Inc. New York.

Reference: Encyclopaedia Of The Musical Theatre, 2nd Edition. Who is Who, German edition.
- Munzinger Archiv Germany - Kürschners Deutscher Literaturkalender.