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Guitar hero Rick McPhail is dazzling audiences in Hamburg.

Neo-Krautrock Wunderkind from Old Orchard Beach



He swears he's not a Sprocket, but bewitching lead guitarist Rick McPhail, 41, is a central figure in the indie-rock band Tocotronic, which keeps pumping out hits in Germany to a rapt audience.

How many black turtlenecks do you own?

Quite a few, but I haven't worn them much lately. Guess I'm not feeling very existentialist.

Can you go grocery shopping in Germany without being mobbed by fans?

Sometimes I think people recognize me, but that just might be paranoia.

The best was when we took the train a lot for interviews a few records back and were in *Deutsche Bahn* magazine; you could tell people had just read the article and would look at us and think, "Is that them? No, can't be, can it?"

How many number-one hits do you have, exactly?

One. You don't have to sell a lot of records to do that nowadays.

What do your German friends think of Maine?

The one who's visited says Portland is ugly. A mutual friend from Portsmouth heard this, and we both said, "You must be thinking about South Portland."

Tell us about the moment you stepped through a mirror in Old Orchard Beach and woke up in Germany.

I'd been dating a German woman in San

Francisco, but she moved back home to finish studying. When she came back on vacation, she said, "Come to Germany for a year." So I did and immediately started a band in 1993, because I couldn't find anyone making decent music.

I moved to Hamburg in 1999 and was offered to go on tour with Tocotronic selling T-shirts. Then they needed someone who could play synthesizer for their new record at the time, so they asked me to start playing live with them.

If you were to bring your Freunde to Maine, where would you take them?

I'd take the bandmates up to Rangeley. A Freud protégé named Wilhelm Reich fled there just before World War II; he had some weird concepts and experiments that the band found interesting and funny for a time. Supposedly his old house is now a museum.

Definitely Peaks Island, Portland Head Light, and L.L. Bean, too.

Are Germans closet Mainers?

When I tell people I'm from Maine, they either say, "Ah, John Irving," or "Ah, Ste-



McPhail, left, and Tocotronic electrify Dortmund's 2010 Juicy Beats Festival.

phen King." Both of those writers are very distinctive and have created two completely different mystiques; it's quite funny how people see Maine because of those writers' extreme descriptions of it.

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Photography: Bill Finney

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PERFORMANCE



Rabid fans follow Tocotronic's exploits. From left to right: "Fortunately the guys are in the audience of Tocotronic"; "Let me through! I am Ernst Hugo von Salen-Priesnitz of Tocotronic, and I have cramp ointment here." Catch the rest at: portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2012/04/tocotronic-extras.

Has your off-lander status affected the style of the music?

I think the last few records have gotten noisier and rockier mainly because we kind of influenced ourselves by playing live and tapped into that energy more and more.

In one of your photos, you have a shirt that says, "The 80's can suck it." I take it you're over the nostalgia.

For me it's definitely over. I don't want to sound snobby, but with Venus Vegas, my old band, and Tocotronic, we played that 10 years ago. I think being nostalgic while trying to do something new can be very limiting.

So, RIP the 1980s. Still, if you guys were magically whisked to this side of the pond in the '80s, who'd you be?

The nihilist band Autobahn, based on Kraftwerk, in *The Big Lebowski*.

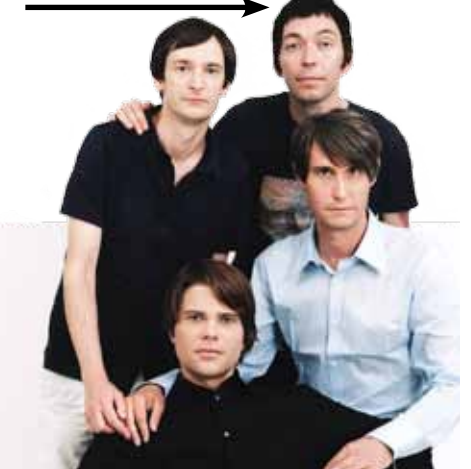
What's the oddest thing fans give you?

Stuffed animals, which is quite funny to be this highly regarded intellectual indie-rock band who gets toys thrown on stage. We usually collect them all throughout the tour and, at the last show we play, we give them all back to the audience—except for a few good ones I sort out for my son.

What's "Maine" to you?

We usually fly into Boston and then drive up.

RICK McPHAIL



FROM LEFT: KATZ & GOLDT/ TOCOTRONIX.DE; TOCOTRONIC

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So when we cross the Piscataqua River Bridge in Portsmouth, I feel it: the “wicked goodness” sweeps over me.

Are you “home” in Germany?

When I first moved here I lived in the British sector, Nordrhein Westfalen, and a lot of the Left Wing people I knew were tired of being occupied by British and American troops, because the Cold War was over. I remember how they had gotten hold of documents stating that in the case of a Soviet invasion the G.I.’s furniture had a higher priority for evacuation than German citizens. I often half-jokingly heard, “Ami, go home.”

Does Maine follow you?

Yes, I get homesick, and I’d like to move back some day. Tocotronic and I are quite political—our opinions lean towards the Left. We speak very openly about the things we stand for, so it’s usually American politics that put the lid on my homesickness.

Are there people in Maine who wish you hadn’t gone?

Everyone, I hope.

Do you know there’s a fragment of the Berlin Wall in front of DiMillo’s?

I’ve been to Checkpoint Charlie twice, and what they did was horrible. I have nothing against Socialism, but you can’t force people to stay and shoot them if they try to leave. The crimes of the Stasi [Staatssicherheit, State Security] and the whole surveillance society is a piece of history that everyone should learn from, especially Americans nowadays.

As far as the Wall goes, the only bummer is that it fell under Reagan’s watch. I just can’t see the guy as a hero. When I think of him I think of Iran Contra, lying to Congress, and Oliver North; not, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.” I prefer Kennedy’s “Ich bin ein Berliner.” Reagan’s line is the bad cover version.

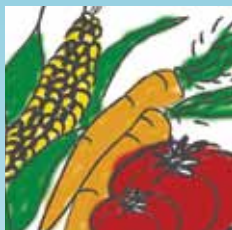
Are you a future politician?

Maybe when I move back someday I can start my political career with a speech in front of that piece of the Wall. ■

▶ For more, visit portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2012/04/tocotronic-extras.



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