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One-Hit Wonders
An Oblique History of Popular Music

Edited by
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To the two human jukeboxes of my family

Dorothy Gibson Roberts (1902–91)

Martha Roberts Hill (1934–2016)

Nena, "99 Luftballons/99 Red Balloons" (1983)

Melanie Schiller

A few years ago, in the mailroom of the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, I unpacked my author's copy of a volume to which I contributed. A friendly Dutch colleague in a chatty mood walked by and asked what the book was about. "German popular music," I answered, only to have him break out in laughter. "German popular music?"¹ That is a contradiction in terms!" he exclaimed before rushing off, laughing some more. Granted, Germans are not famous for their "grooviness" or general success in pop music. Perceived from the outside, when it comes to popular music, Germans might seem to either have terrible taste and seriously overappreciate the likes of David Hasselhoff or else adopt a kind of cold, robotic, or mechanical attitude. These stereotypes were at least partially challenged late one night a few months after the mailroom incident, when a staff outing ended in a karaoke bar. A German colleague and I passionately performed Nena's "99 Luftballons" and everyone could sing along—including the colleague who had laughed down the very idea of German popular music.

This may be just a personal anecdote, but our karaoke experience can be considered representative in a broader sense, as it points to the exceptional character of Nena's Number 1 worldwide hit. Few other German songs have met similar success on the international charts as "99 Luftballons" and its English version, "99 Red Balloons," which was released the following year. When the song first came out, in January 1983, it was a Number 1 hit in Germany. One year later, the English-language version made it to the top of the UK charts, where it stayed for three weeks.¹ In the United States, the German-language version "only" made it to second place on the *Billboard* Hot 100.² Given that "99 Luftballons" has remained their only worldwide hit, Nena is internationally perceived as a one-hit-wonder. That is not the case in Germany, however. With forty-two singles in the German Top 100 and thirty-two albums in the charts,³ numerous live tours, industry prizes, collaborations, and television appearances

¹ *Official Single Chart Top 100*. Available online: <https://www.officialcharts.com/charts/singles-chart/19840226/7501/> (accessed April 27, 2021).

² *Billboard The Hot 100*. Available online: <https://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100/1984-03-03> (accessed April 27, 2021).

³ Although it needs to be noted that many of these are re-recordings of old hits and best-of compilations. *Offizielle Charts*, "NENA 99 LUFTBALLONS". Available online: <https://www.offiziellecharts.de/titel-details-922> (accessed April 27, 2021).

over the course of a forty-year career, the group's singer and frontperson Nena (born Gabriele "Nena" Kerner) is still a very well-known celebrity in Germany.

This chapter describes how Nena's iconic 1980s anthem, in addition to being the *one* German song that everyone has danced to and can sing along with, is remarkable in a number of ways. At a general level, "99 Luftballons" illustrates how popular music is bound up with and articulates wider affective regimes in society, both transnationally and across time. Functioning as a kind of seismograph, popular music can be understood as indicating emergent, dominant or residual structures of feeling. That said, popular music is also constitutive of the cultural processes and society of which it is a part. In this sense, this chapter shows how "99 Luftballons" reflects a number of formative affects that were central to the highly politicized societies of the early 1980s. These include anxiety, paranoia, and melancholia, but also hedonism in the face of an anticipated nuclear apocalypse. These central affective tropes were prevalent in both West Germany as a pivotal site of Cold War tensions and more broadly, not least in the United States, where anti-Soviet propaganda fed a culture of fear. The chapter explains how Nena's danceable hit expressed such feelings in a lighthearted and accessible manner, while simultaneously also showcasing how popular music is always part of transnational cultural exchanges.

New cultural forms and genres often emerge as subcultural styles. When they enter mainstream culture, however, they often shed some of their characteristic stylistic and political features. Nena's music exemplifies this process. "99 Luftballons" is associated with the New German Wave ("Neue Deutsche Welle," NDW). This genre was politically motivated, critically reflecting on German history and national identity, among other things. Yet Nena explicitly rejects the idea that their apparently anti-war hit has any political messages, in fact, Nena's international success became a major source of national pride in Germany and international audiences often invoked well-established German stereotypes in trying to make sense of its popularity.

Ninety-Nine Anxieties: Cultural and Political Context

Before becoming world famous, Gabriele Kerner grew up in the midsized town of Hagen in Western Germany, where she joined a band called The Stripes in 1979. The band released one album and several singles with CBS Records and performed on a few German television shows, but never really managed to break through. After the group disbanded in 1981, Nena moved to West Berlin, where she started to socialize with the Nina Hagen Band. Under manager Jim Rakete's guidance, the band Nena (named after herself) eventually formed. Nena's first single "Alles nur getraumt" ("Just a dream," 1982) was also released with CBS and almost instantly became a hit after the band performed the song live on television. It reached Number 2 in the German charts. With the popular and youth media embracing Nena, the charming twenty-two-year-old small-town girl became a national superstar within a just few months.

The idea of "99 Luftballons" occurred to guitarist and lyricist Carlo Karges at a Rolling Stones concert in West Berlin in 1982. Thousands of balloons were dramatically released during the show, and Karges could not help but wonder what would happen

if the wind blew them across the Berlin Wall, triggering the East German regime's paranoia and leading them to believe that something was afoot.⁴ This apprehensive fantasy, as well as the song itself, can be seen as symptomatic of its time. Indeed, the sociopolitical climate was marked by anxiety brought on by an escalation of the Cold War, with Berlin as its central frontier. It was not only in Europe that the 1980s were characterized by the anxiety of living in the face of nuclear annihilation and the specter of mutually assured destruction. These fears were also negotiated in international popular culture, not least in post-apocalyptic action thrillers such as the popular *Mad Max* franchise, dystopian nuclear panic or WWII films such as *Testament* (1983), *The Day After* (1983), and *Red Dawn* (1984), or narratives about the dangers of automated and computerized military technology such as *War Games* (1983) and *Terminator* (1984). Correspondingly, the English version of the track—"99 Red Balloons"—was only one of two songs about nuclear war to reach Number 1 in the UK single charts in 1984, the other being Frankie Goes to Hollywood's "Two Tribes" (1984), which topped the charts just a few months later.⁵

In the early 1980s, fears about a third world war were more than idle fantasies. By the beginning of the decade, the two main powers had at least 50,000 nuclear warheads between them, with a combined explosive capacity a million times that of the atomic bomb, which was dropped on Hiroshima.⁶ Given that attempts at disarmament negotiations and the NATO Double-Track Decision remained inconclusive, in 1983 the German government agreed to allow the deployment of US atomic missiles, including the controversial Pershing II, on West-German territory. In reaction to the threat of an atomic holocaust, a massive peace movement mobilized hundreds of thousands of demonstrators. In June 1982, one of the movement's climactic moments, 400,000 people took to the streets to protest Ronald Reagan's visit to West Germany for a NATO summit,⁷ which also fortuitously coincided with the Rolling Stones concert that inspired Karges to write the lyrics for "99 Luftballons" in Berlin.

"99 Luftballons" captured the zeitgeist of this highly politicized climate, which combined heightened East/West tensions, fear of nuclear world war, and surging protest and peace movements. On the one hand, the song articulates the fear of war. On the other, it channels a certain hedonism in the face of the potential for apocalypse. The lyrics tell a story of fatal misunderstandings, delusions of grandeur, and the desire to conquer unspecified (yet tacitly invoked) enemies: ninety-nine harmless balloons are released only to be mistaken for UFOs in a paranoid political climate. A general deploys a squadron of ninety-nine fighter jets to investigate the threat and the trigger-happy fighter pilots open fire. The "great firework" that results from shooting the balloons, in turn, provokes the neighbors and ninety-nine power-hungry "war-minsters." Metaphorical gasoline is poured and matches are lit, starting a catastrophic

⁴ *Der Spiegel*, "99 Luftballons und das Chaos der Gefühle," March 26, 1984. Available online: <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13510424.html> (accessed April 27, 2021).

⁵ *Offizielle Charts*, "FRANKIE GOES TO HOLLYWOOD TWO TRIBES." Available online: <https://www.officialcharts.com/search/singles/two%20tribes/> (accessed April 27, 2021).

⁶ Gasaway Hill and Mary Lynne, *The Language of Protest* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

⁷ *Der Spiegel*, "Großdemo gegen Nato-Doppelbeschluss" June 10, 2008. Available online: <https://www.spiegel.de/geschichte/kalenderblatt-10-6-1982-a-947064.html> (accessed April 27, 2021).

war that lasts ninety-nine years. The song ends on a melancholic note. In the aftermath of the devastating nuclear war, the narrator walks through a post-apocalyptic world without winners. Amid the rubble, she finds a trace of the past: a balloon, which she lets fly.

Ninety-Nine Styles: From Subculture to Mainstream

In German public discourse, Nena is largely associated with the NDW music genre, which can be understood as emerging from punk and developing into post-punk and pop between 1979 and 1984. The genre started as a playful, stylistically diverse subculture. It was marked by political concerns, involving singing in German to distance itself from the dominant English pop of its time, an amateurish attitude, rejecting professionalism, and making critical and sometimes satirical comments on contemporary urban *tristesse*.⁸ Lyrics were often descriptive, exhibiting a laconic or down-to-earth attitude. Indeed, NDW music did not put forward utopian worldviews or visions, rarely talked about love, and often sought a new, unadorned, and personal grasp of the present.⁹

Everyday problems and questions of German national identity were prevalent. Indeed, bands such as Middle Class Fantasies provoked listeners with song titles such as “Party in the Gas Chamber” (1981), whereas Deutsch Amerikanische Freundschaft (DAF) commanded its audience to “dance the Adolf Hitler” in the song “Der Mussolini” (1981). Although NDW was inspired by punk and new wave from Britain and the United States to a certain degree, it quickly developed into a distinct genre in its own right. Musically, it borrowed elements of reggae, funk, rockabilly, and ska. These were combined with synthetic sounds and musical as well as lyrical humor, reflexivity, ambiguity, wit, and ironic stylistic references to German Schlager in particular.¹⁰

The genre started as a small, DIY, and politically motivated subculture based on punk’s “no-future” and hedonism. Yet NDW quickly developed a more poppy style and artistic ambitions. As its success grew, it was soon appropriated by the music industry and marketed as “fun pop” using artists that were no longer connected to the original subculture. Although Nena shared some common roots with important NDW bands such as Extrabreit, which also originated in Hagen, eventually the band had

⁸ Barbara Hornberger, “Neue Deutsche Welle: Tactical Affirmation as Strategy of Subversion,” in *Made in Germany*, ed. Oliver Seibt, Martin Ringsmut and David-Emil Wickstrom (London: Routledge, 2021), 135–44.

⁹ Barbara Hornberger, “‘NDW’/New German Wave: From Punk to Mainstream,” in *Perspectives on German Popular Music*, ed. Michael Ahlers and Christoph Jacke (London: Routledge, 2017), 196.

¹⁰ Schlager is a hugely popular music genre in Germany. It is typically associated with a highly standardized aesthetic and a traditional or reactionary worldview, including associations with conservatism and nationalism. Schlager songs primarily revolve around themes of romantic (heterosexual) love and homeland, and generally avoid potentially controversial or political topics. Historically, it was also associated with Nazism during the period of the Third Reich. See my *Soundtracking Germany* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020) and “Schlager,” in *Music Around the World: A Global Encyclopedia*, ed. Andrew R. Martin and Matthew Mihalka (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2020), 781–2.

few connections with the original new wave scene. Clearly, Nena belongs to the final, commercialized phase of NDW, in which it had shed its explicitly artistic and political ambitions.

Still, “99 Luftballons” shares some stylistic features with NDW. It is sung in German, which had become the main language of choice in pop and rock by then,¹¹ has a synthesizer sound, and incorporates different stylistic elements (funk and soul). There is also Nena’s untrained voice and naive attitude, and the use of a (however, fictional) personal experience as a narrative starting point, which is combined with a danceable beat. All of this said, unlike much NDW music, the song does not describe a mundane situation but rather tells an epic science-fiction story with global reach. What is more, its critical message is not obviously undermined by irony or reflexivity—although the combination of an apocalyptic narrative with a lighthearted tune and danceable style can be seen as somewhat disjunctive. Accordingly, the song bridges the gap between the stylistic and political intentions of German post-punk, peace movement protest songs, German Schlager, and 1980s hedonism. Something of this can be seen in the fact that “99 Luftballons” stood in the charts besides Cindy Lauper’s “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun.” What is more, the German NDW-pop phenomenon Markus did have a major hit called “I will Spaß” (“I Wanna Have Fun,” 1982) and the German singer Nicole had won the Eurovision Song Contest in Harrogate in the UK with a thematically comparable Schlager-song named “Ein bisschen Frieden” (“A Little Peace,” 1981) the year before.

Although both “Ein bisschen Frieden” and “99 Luftballons” obviously tie in with Cold War affective regimes, neither Nicole nor Nena wanted their songs to be understood as political. Lyricist Carlo Karges, for instance, was vocal in pointing out that his text of “99 Luftballons” refers to a broader context—that is, not only to “the relationship between the nations, [‘den Volkern’], but also all this paranoia in private life.”¹² Karges’s comment refers to the dominant cultural trope of anxiety in the early 1980s. For instance, in the *Billboard* Hot 100, “99 Luftballons” was listed next to Rockwell’s song “Somebody’s Watching Me” (1983), which is about the anxiety of being surveilled: “I always feel like somebody’s watching me/and I have no privacy—can the people on TV see me or am I just paranoid?” According to Karges, the message of “99 Luftballons” is “that paranoia is dominating our lives. Mutual fear leads to treating each other more cruelly than is necessary. Because the one who strikes first has the advantage. That is dangerous.”¹³ Nena herself summarizes the song in similarly general and “apolitical” terms: “Something big suddenly erupts from a small occurrence. We’re confronted with things that originally no one wanted.”¹⁴ Although explicitly unwilling to frame “99 Luftballons” as a political or protest song, Nena and Karges do suggest

¹¹ In 1982, almost half of all songs in the German charts were in German. Sebastian Peters, *Ein Lied Mehr zur Lage der Nation* (Berlin: Archiv der Jugendkulturen, 2010), 251.

¹² *Der Spiegel*, “99 Luftballons,” my translation. The original German reads: “auf die Beziehungen zwischen den Volkern, sondern auch auf diese ganze Paranoia im privaten Bereich.”

¹³ *Der Spiegel*, “99 Luftballons.”

¹⁴ My translation of the original German, which reads as follows: “Aus’ner kleinen Geschichte wird plötzlich ’ne große. Man wird mit Sachen konfrontiert die ursprünglich niemand wollte.” Quoted in Dorfner and Garms 1984: 64.

that the song articulates wider cultural and societal structures of feeling, including tropes of anxiety and paranoia, and a general feeling of having lost agency

Ninety-Nine Stereotypes: International Success and Reception

Having become a Number 1 hit in Germany, the song traveled across the Atlantic thanks to a lucky coincidence. Christiane Felscherinow (known as Christiane F) was in Los Angeles to promote her film *Christiane F—Wir Kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo* (“We Children of Bahnhof Zoo,” 1981), where she met with radio DJ Rodney Bingenheimer for an interview. Bingenheimer asked her about the latest trends in German music and Christiane wanted to play a song by her boyfriend’s band Einstürzende Neubauten. While cueing up a mixtape, however, she landed on “99 Luftballons” and played that song (in its original German version) instead.¹⁵ Bingenheimer started playing the song regularly on his show and other West-Coast radio stations started picking it up. Eventually, MTV took it into heavy rotation and *Rolling Stone* labeled Nena “Germany’s hottest pop phenomenon.”¹⁶

After the song entered the US charts, an English-language version was planned for release. The band tried translating the original but could not quite manage to get the sound right. Manager Jim Rakete therefore approached Kevin McAlea, who was then playing with Barclay James Harvest, and asked him to give it a try.¹⁷ Having asked a German friend to translate the general gist of the song, McAlea focused on the “sound the lyrics were making” instead of the song’s meaning.¹⁸ In the translation process, the overall narrative remained relatively unchanged, though some details were amended. The now explicitly *red* balloons (in the original they are just balloons, no color specified) allude to the Soviet threat more clearly than the German version. Further, the lyrics tell the story of how, after the balloons’ release, “back at base, bugs in the software flash the message, ‘something’s out there.’” More explicitly than the German original, this played into fears about automated and computerized war technology. The same year, on September 26, 1983, Soviet Army officer Stanislav Petrov unintentionally brought the song’s narrative to life. An early warning system signaled that up to five US nuclear missiles had been launched and were approaching Soviet territory. In contrast to the fictional scenario presented in the song, Petrov decided not to retaliate. Even according to the logic of mutually assured destruction, this was a stroke of luck, for there were no US missiles; rather, the system had interpreted a reflection in the clouds as an enemy attack. In the song’s narrative, however, the machinery of war roars into action, leading to “99 years of war.” The English version also ends in post-apocalyptic rubble, with the narrator searching for a souvenir to prove that the

¹⁵ Gavin Edwards, “Missed the ’80s? Nena, and ‘99 Luftballons,’ Aights Live in America,” *The New York Times*, October 2, 2016. Available online <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/03/arts/music/vena-99-luftballons-interview.html> (accessed April 27, 2021).

¹⁶ Hollow Skai, *Alles Nur Getraumt* (Hofen Hannibal, 2009), 181.

¹⁷ Hill and Lynne, *Language of Protest*.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

contemporary world had once existed. In the end, she finds a red balloon and lets it fly. Although the song’s general narrative does not differ significantly, the English version is more explicit in its references to the two superpowers and critique of technological developments and warfare. Resonating strongly with cultural anxieties and the climate of paranoia, it leaves less room for misunderstanding its political implications than its German forerunner. In later interviews, Nena has said that she dislikes the English version precisely because it is too “blatant.”¹⁹

The success of “99 Luftballons” in the United States was preceded by a few early 1980s hits in German-language or German-inspired music. These include Peter Schilling’s track “Major Tom (Coming Home)” (1982), the English-language version of which was a hit, and his album, *Error in System* (1983), which was on the American charts for more than twenty weeks. After the Fire’s English-language cover of Falco’s German song “Der Kommissar” (1982), which peaked at Number 5 in the *Billboard* charts, and Trio’s “Da Da Da” (1982), which, combining English and German lyrics, was another international hit in 1982.²⁰ Similarly, Kraftwerk’s earlier international successes, Iggy Pop’s late 1970s Berlin albums, and David Bowie’s Berlin trilogy put forward an image of Germany as an equally dangerous, gloomy, and enthralling place inhabited by man-machines, the latter two artists fostering a fascination with Berlin as the divided city. “Germany embodied the spirit of roboticism for American new wave kids,” Rob Sheffield, a contributing editor at *Rolling Stone*, explained. “American kids fantasized about Berlin the way German kids fantasized about Detroit,”²¹ while popular new wave artists such as Gary Numan, DEVO, and David Byrne of Talking Heads played with emotionlessness, robotic aesthetics. Against this cultural backdrop, a poppy and danceable new wave song about the end of the world from West Berlin made a lot of sense to American audiences.

Equally fascinated and bemused by Germany’s musical successes, Tamara Jones wrote for the Associated Press in 1984 that “decades after most of the world began to rock, German artists are finally starting to roll as Teutonic tunes wend their way to the top of the revered American and British pop charts.”²² Jones associated the wider German musical landscape with “images of shrill Valkyries, apple-cheeked oompah bands and the smoky invitations of Marlene Dietrich rasping from the Victrola.”²³ In this context, Jones saw the success of Nena’s “99 Luftballons” as rather surprising, but also took the track to symbolize a broader respectable trend in German pop. While US fans and critics celebrated the “exotic” German phenomenon and its “fabulous ‘99 Luftballons,’” as *Billboard* had it,²⁴ the British music press was less amused. The rhetoric of the Second World War haunted British reviews, which featured military references and pervasive national stereotypes. *The New Musical Express*, for instance, sarcastically

¹⁹ Andy Strike, “99 Red Herrings,” *Record Mirror*, March 10, 1984, 14.

²⁰ For more on Trio, see Tim Quirk’s chapter in this volume.

²¹ Edwards, “Missed the ’80s?”

²² Tamara Jones, “Music Makers: German Music Gains International Success,” *The Associated Press*, March 30, 1984. <https://advance.lexis-com.proxy-ub.rug.nl/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3SJ4-JD20-0011-6470-00000-00&context=1516831> (accessed April 27, 2021).

²³ *Ibid*.

²⁴ *Der Spiegel*, “99 Luftballons.”

remarked that “suddenly it really is Deutschland, Deutschland Uber Alles. As the whole world turns Teuton”²⁵ It called Nena “the queen of German high street pop,”²⁶ while *The Guardian* described her “99 Red Balloons” as not only “unoriginal”²⁷ but a “weapon that could wreak more havoc than the zeppelin”²⁸

Ninety-Nine Nationalisms: German Pride and Outlook

There are multiple tensions, then, between this song’s danceable, lighthearted, earworm quality and its apparent (but disclaimed) political content and articulation of affective cultural tropes. These tensions play out differently in Germany, where the lyrics are easily understood, than among international audiences, who might neither know nor necessarily care about the song’s narrative. Nena herself is always keen to emphasize the importance of the German lyrics, enthusiastically describing her experience of performing the song for an audience for whom “99 Luftballons” was their first contact with German language and culture. According to her, although they might not literally understand the content, they could “feel the message of the song”²⁹ Her emphasis on “emotional understanding” resonates with the idea of popular music being able to express structures of feeling—that is, the general organization of emotion in a given period. Structures of feeling might not be fully articulated, rather, they are formative processes that shape experience in particular contexts.

In that sense, Nena’s emphasis of the importance of German lyrics also reflects broader discourses of German national identity and popular music in the early 1980s, whereas NDW initially aimed to distance itself from “imported” punk and post-punk by translating those genres into the German context on its own terms, it simultaneously took a reflexive, ironic distance from its own home country. Questions of German identity, at the levels of both mundane experience and national history, became imperative, yet NDW always addressed them with critical distance and often playful, sometimes provocative irony. In the later phase of NDW with which Nena is associated, however, the use of the German language had become strongly connected with notions of German (musical) pride, at least in public discourse. After decades of pop music dominated by the English language, at last Germans “dared” to sing in German again, as mainstream media discourse had it. Nena’s international success catalyzed a newly emerging national pride, as German popular music moved beyond

²⁵ Biba Kopf, “Nena: The Girl From C&A,” *New Musical Express*, May 5, 1984. Available online <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/nena-the-girl-from-ca> (accessed April 27, 2021). “Deutschland, Deutschland Uber Alles,” here, refers to the first verse of the German national anthem sung during the Nazi period.

²⁶ Kopf, “Nena.”

²⁷ *The Guardian*, quoted in *Der Spiegel*, “99 Luftballons.”

²⁸ *Ibid.* My translation of the following German: “Nena kam mit ‘99 Red Balloons,’ einer Waffe, die größere Verwüstungen anrichten kann als die Zeppeline.”

²⁹ Patrick Garvin, “Cover Songs Uncovered: ‘99 Luftballons’/ ‘99 Red Balloons,’” *The Pop Culture Experiment*, March 26, 2018. Available online <https://popcultureexperiment.com/2018/03/26/cover-songs-uncovered-99-luftballons-99-red-balloons/> (accessed April 27, 2021).

imitating Anglo-American idols over and over again.³⁰ When in 1984 a journalist asked Frank Dietrich, the international manager for WEA Records, why music from Germany had not been internationally successful until this point, he gave the following answer: “The reason this didn’t happen before is because the standard and quality of German music haven’t been very good until now. . . . Before that, everybody was just copying the latest American and British trends, we lacked individuality.”³¹ Similarly, the Munich-based newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* celebrated the German music success abroad: “It’s pleasing, not to mention well-deserved, that the world (in particular that cultural superpower, the USA) is finally sitting up and taking notice of our German cultural achievements. . . . What if a whole new generation of Americans gets its picture of Germany from Nena? Worse things could happen.”³² Accordingly, Nena became a symbol for a reawakened sense of national achievement and an international cultural ambassador, a role that she largely embraced. Indeed, in an interview from 1984 she stressed that “when I go on tour in the United States, I want to perform in German as much as possible.”³³

Nena (the group) disbanded in 1987 and Nena Kerner pursued a solo career. She has continued to perform “99 Luftballons” (although never in English) and recorded other versions of the song (2002, 2009). Lyricist Carlo Karges died in 2002, but other members of the band remain influential figures in the German music industry.³⁴ In the international imagination, “99 Luftballons” is one of the most iconic songs of the 1980s. It is still firmly associated with the dire political climate in which it was produced, Berlin, and the Cold War in particular. The song has often been covered in diverse genres and different languages, becoming a classic at wedding parties worldwide. Its continuing international recognizability makes it a popular song to translate in German-language classrooms. The song’s theme, style, and affective structure might well continue to resonate with contemporary audiences, proving popular music’s potential for transhistorical affective appeal. Indeed, there is a wider trend of 1980s anxieties returning in international popular culture, with films such as *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) and TV series such as *Stranger Things* (2016–ongoing) recalling Cold War dystopian paranoia. Finally, as my colleagues and I know from personal experience, “99 Luftballons” has also taken on a second life as a staple in karaoke bars, as the *New York Times* points out.³⁵ For future karaoke nights, Nena’s advice for singing her song is “Take a deep breath before you start. And switch from the English to the German version.”³⁶

³⁰ Very similar arguments were made a decade earlier in connection with Krautrock, but NDW was commercially more successful in Germany (as well as internationally) and gained much wider media attention.

³¹ Jones, “Music Makers.”

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Uwe Fahrenkrog-Petersen, for instance, is an important music producer and composer.

³⁵ Edwards, “Missed the ‘80s?”

³⁶ *Ibid.*

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The Grateful Dead, "Touch of Grey" (1987)

Thomas Irvine

In Douglas Coupland's short prose collection *Polaroids from the Dead*, Dennis, a long-time Deadhead who "freedom dances" in the foyers and parking lots of 1980s Dead shows, encounters a younger fan, who asks him where he can score some acid "If you have to buy it, then you won't be able to deal with it," Dennis answers, only to be told, "cry into your dime bag, you hippie weed" The snapshot then transfers to Dennis's inner monologue "Really These kids Shows weren't always like that Dead shows were always the same as always until, *kablooey*, the MTV video happened and the kiddies began showing up, eager to party, not appreciating the true Dead spirit"¹ The MTV video was of the song "Touch of Grey," which drove the Dead's 1987 album *In the Dark* to the Top 10 of the *Billboard* charts "Touch of Grey," recorded twenty-two years after the band came together in a more-or-less stable constellation, was their first and only chart hit of anything like this magnitude They were a late one-hit wonder

Like their California contemporary Ronald Reagan, who rose from B-Movie star to conservative governor of California and then president of the United States, the Grateful Dead were on a journey that traces a line of continuity between 1960s and 1980s America Following their early successes in the late 1960s, the Dead just kept going while contemporaries such as the Jefferson Airplane or Big Brother and the Holding Company faded, and acts such as the Rolling Stones transitioned to global superstardom Through the 1970s the Dead continued to make good money touring By the mid-1980s unmistakable signs were mounting of growing popularity, driven by a younger generation's interest and commercial enthusiasm for the imagined Arcadian community of Haight Ashbury c. 1967 For the Dead's new followers, this era, which Sarah Hill calls San Francisco's "short 1960s," was their freaky alternative to the white-bread American "shining city on a hill" of Reagan's first inaugural address The young protagonists of Hill's "long 1960s," a new generation of Grateful Dead fans, lived their nostalgia by joining the caravan of enthusiasts who had long followed the band from show to show² These were the Deadheads, who, eschewing commercial

¹ Douglas Coupland, *Polaroids from the Dead* (New York Harper Collins, 1996), 26–7

² See Sarah Hill, *San Francisco and the Long 60s* (London Bloomsbury, 2016), 301, for a discussion of tensions between "authentic and co-opted hippiedom" See also Rob Weir, "Tie-Dyes and Flannel