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ATLANTIK-BRÜCKE E.V.

Remarks upon Reception of the XIII Vernon A. Walters Award

By Dr. Jürgen R. Großmann

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As Prepared For Delivery

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When I entered the Metropolitan Club today, I was overwhelmed, not only because of the splendid traditional surroundings and atmosphere, but also because so many friends are here. After the warm comments by two German statesmen, however, I have to admit that it is a shame my mother-in-law could not be here to hear this. She would of course not have believed most of the compliments paid, but at least she would have been convinced that Dagmar's and my marriage is not a complete mismatch.

So I come from Germany – Land der Ideen, The Land of Ideas. The country which produced so many great poets and thinkers. I am talking about Goethe, Schiller, and Hegel. The country that produced so many great composers and musicians. And I am talking about Beethoven, Schubert, and Strauss. OK, so today in the USA, Germany is better known for Dirk Nowitzki, Juergen Klinsmann, and Steffi Graf. But you have an idea where I am coming from.

Given my background, I ought to be making an "Old World" speech for you this evening, one about tradition and spirit, a speech with reflection and pathos. And then (as circumstance warrants), I should top it all off by singing the praises of my business.

But as I am currently enjoying a wonderful interlude between two major stages in my career, tonight you will be spared the usual advertising pitch.

Instead, Ladies and Gentlemen, you are going to experience my particular appreciation of candor. Or as the Americans say, I am going to give it to you straight.

Yes, Ladies and Gentlemen, I have a confession to make.

In my youth – not that long ago, dare I say – yes, in my youth, at a time when I should have been getting a grip on Goethe, Schiller, and Hegel, I spent my school days thinking about very different guys. They were cooler, more casually dressed, and certainly more laid back than those spiritual giants of good old Germany.

Back in the days when most people in my hometown in the Ruhr Valley were still going about their life in the traditional blue overalls worn by German workers, when the sky always seemed grey and overcast and the air was heavy with smoke from the collieries and blast furnaces, a group of young Americans – dressed in khaki slacks and blue and white striped shirts, leaning on the side of a Corvette stingray – took me on a dream journey to Californian beaches, where one could surf on the crest of a wave, be at one with the power of the sea, draw on the motion of the waves, and then come back up to the beach to beautiful girls in the hot sand.

Indeed, 'Surfer Girl' was the one that fired my imagination. Fired it up far more than Sisi, the Empress of Austria who was idolized by most of my compatriots at the time. Even when the Empress was played by a film star as attractive as Romy Schneider, the famous German actress, it was still *Surfer Girl*, *Barbara Ann*, and *Wendy* I was thinking about.

You have not guessed? I am talking about the Beach Boys. To me, they were friends, not distant idols or rock stars. They were the cool guys I would have loved to have had as brothers – no offence to my own brother, who could not be here today.

You know how cool they were? Imagine for a moment that when you were a teenager, your parents had gone away on vacation and left you with 250 bucks. What would you have done? It is probably better if most of us do not answer this question here in public! But do you know what the Beach Boys did? They bought a few instruments and amps and turned their garage into a recording studio. Like Bob Hewlett and Steve Packard did in the IT sector, they turned an industry upside down from the back of a garage.

By doing so, they were so unconventional, showed such freedom, such a zest for life, such optimism, and such an uncomplicated approach to life; all of which was completely foreign to the majority of Germans at the time. Even worse, most of our parents were damn suspicious of this attitude. They would say, "What do these young Americans think they are doing? Having fun? Being happy? Doing nothing but playing music?"

For me, Ladies and Gentlemen, the example given to us from the incomparable Beach Boys is better suited to explaining German-American relations than most academic essays. Below the surface of pop music, there are deeply hidden roots and complexities that reveal a lot about the relationship between our two countries.

My fellow Germans in this room tonight may be wondering, "What is so special about the Beach Boys? What is he doing today, on such solemn occasion, talking about a long-forgotten pop group like the Beach Boys?"

It is not that I spend much time on the beach myself. Whenever I make myself comfortable in the sand, it only takes minutes before some whale watchers or environmentalist activists come running up to me and try to push that clumsy animal back into the water yelling something about endangered species, save the whales, etc. That is no fun!

No – I will tell you why I like the Beach Boys so much. It has a lot to do with the fact that three of the five Beach Boys were brothers: Brian, Dennis, and Carl Wilson. Incidentally, Brian, the oldest but the only one of them still alive, will be 65 this summer.

Dennis, the drummer, was the surfer who was desperate to put his intense feelings about the world around him into lyrics, but he just never had the ability. He was the best looking though, the most athletic, a real heartthrob, and he even did some acting from time to time.

Carl was wild about rock 'n' roll and brought rhythm and tempo to their creations. He was also the best singer, and played lead guitar. He also had some problems with his weight, which made him all the more likeable for me: he was too short for his weight.

Their brother Brian was different. He was the musician of the three. He loved the harmonies of the Four Freshmen, the energy of Chuck Berry, the arrangements of Phil Spector, and he was able to turn Dennis' feelings into music. He was creative, he was the technical brains, the perfectionist, but he sometimes lost touch with reality.

So they were all brothers, and of course there was a lot of rivalry between them. But at the same time they were all ready to give something extra of themselves, or to rein themselves in, in order to get the whole idea off the ground.

For me, the invention of their famous "California Sound" is a perfect example of team work; the result of bringing different talents under one roof, dividing work between people of different abilities, aptitudes, and temperaments – working hard and with discipline.

Every Beach Boys song, whether it is *Surfin' USA*, *I Get Around*, or *Good Vibrations*, is evidence of the old proverb that the whole can be more than the sum of its parts. For me, that is precisely what is great about our societies on both sides of the Atlantic. Several people getting together and making something of their differences. It is about a spirit of fraternity.

Brothers and sisters, as we all know, do not always have easy relationships:
They quarrel, they make up;
They love each other, they do not get along;
They help each other, they are rivals.

But always, when push comes to shove, they stick together. And that is exactly why, Ladies and Gentlemen, what I wish for is that we Germans and Americans will always remain like brothers, like sisters.

Fraternity is a pact between people who are often more similar to each other than they even realize themselves.

When I heard the Beach Boys for the first time, it was initially the music that blew me away. But then it was the story of these boys, the Wilson brothers, who had worked hard to achieve something together. That is what inspired me.

Likewise, America has always meant a place of coexistence, of teamwork, to me.

I can assure all of you American friends gathered here at the Metropolitan Club that you have, for years, given me this feeling of wonderful warm-hearted fraternity wherever I have been a guest here. And it is the same again tonight. For that, I give you my sincere thanks.

This deep-felt, wonderful feeling of fraternity is the theme of my own private German-American relationship.

Whether it is personal friendships still existing today to small town Middletown, Ohio, the place where I did my first apprenticeship with a steel mill in 1971.

Whether it is the partnership between Purdue University and GISMA in Hannover, Niedersachsen I had the honor to bring about.

Whether it means the many personal relationships the Atlantik-Brücke has produced.

Whether it is my style of management, which I am told would not be out of place in the Midwest – the “rolling up your sleeves” spirit, that traditional, honest work ethic. It is definitely more than just a romantic notion that binds us together.

There has always been a transatlantic exchange. Ever since the birth of this powerful nation, a great deal of your fresh American culture – so wonderfully free from the constraints of tradition and self-doubt – has come back over to us in Europe. And in return, quite of a few of us came here from Europe bringing ideas, a desire to make things better than at home, and a vision of contributing to and being a part of this new and exciting country.

And to me, the Beach Boys are a fantastic symbol of this mutual exchange and support of productive cooperation. A symbol from which we can still learn a lot.

There is nothing wrong if brothers have completely different talents and opinions, if they argue, for example, over foreign policy. Brothers can move apart, and they can move back together. They still share the same values, family values.

Thirty years after the Beach Boys' first Number One, their KOKOMO took them back to the top of the charts. The important thing is that they stuck together through thick and thin. We all should remember that although we might not get along all too well sometimes, we still belong to the same family.

Sure, we should express frankly what we think. Freedom of speech is a mark of fraternity. But we should try not to wind each other up too much, not to get on each others nerves.

It is this fraternal relationship that holds Germans and Americans together. We listen and we learn from one another. We admire and we imitate. We try to outdo one another, and we cheer each other's successes. Maybe sometimes we are just proud of the other – even if we do not necessarily admit it.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you again for these memorable festivities. The U.S.-German relationship is perhaps a lot more straightforward than it looks – especially if you go on what the two countries' medias say about one another.

So let me close by saying this: Let us nurture this fraternal bond whenever we have the opportunity. The Beach Boys called their recording company Brother Records – they saw the importance of fraternity. And now I should say, as the Beach Boys song goes, "It's about time."

A toast to fraternity and to you all.

Thank you for being here!

Thank you for bestowing the honor of the Vernon A. Walters Award on me.

And thank you all for personally striving for an even better transatlantic relationship.

Cheers and Glückauf!