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HUMOROUS GUIDE TO
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Ask any Swiss person about Mani Matter and they will start singing one of his many songs. Many of us who were not yet born when Matter was publishing his songs learned his songs in school or sang them at the local scouts meeting. The sound of his voice singing in the Bernese dialect and his guitar playing are almost iconic by now. And every now and then a Swiss artist will use the Matter's great lyrics and melodies and create a cover version (e.g. the project Matter Rock by several Swiss artists as a tribute to Matter's work).

Who was this modern day troubadour? His biography in short: His real name was Hans Peter Matter and he was born in 1936 in Herzogenbuchsee and grew up in Berne (which explains his Bernese accent). Mani was his scout name and he adopted it as a stage name. After school he studied law and practiced for a few years until he became a popular dialect artist in Switzerland. From the late 1960ies he began giving concerts together with the Berner Troubadours and started his solo career in 1971. Unfortunately, he died in 1972 in a car accident on his way to a concert.

Maybe it was his early death (he died at age 36) that helped turning him into an icon of Swiss music and popular culture as is often the case when famous artists die at a young age (like e.g. James Dean). It was definitely also his unique style of performing, the clever lyrics of his songs and his charisma that make Matter still appeal to so many different people. Most of his songs are generally relevant to life even today.

My personal favorites include "De Ferdinand isch gschorbe" which tells the story of a neighborhood cat that died, "Hemmige" which talks about people's inhibitions or "De Alpeflug" which tells the story of a flight over the alps that didn't end well.

One of his most famous songs is "I han es Zündhölzli azündt" ("I lit a match") which is probably more relevant today than ever. I translated the lyrics to give you an impression of Matter's style and fine humour:

I han es Zündhölzli azündt
I lit a match
Und das het e Flamme gäh
And it made a flame
Und i ha für d'Zigarette
And for my cigarette
Welle Fүү vom Hölzli näh
I wanted to take fire from the match
Aber ds Hölzli isch dervo-
But the match dropped

gspickt und uf de Teppich cho
And landed on the carpet
Und des hätt no fasch es Loch im Teppich gäh dervo
And it almost made a hole in the carpet

Ja me weiss was cha passiere
You know what can happen
We me ned ufpasst mit Fүүr
If you aren't careful with fire
Und für d'Gluet ar Zigarette
And for the glow of a cigarette
Isch de Teppich doch de z'tүүr
Is the carpet too expensive
Und vom Teppich het o Grus
And from the carpet could have oh horror
Chöonne ds Fүүr i ds ganze Huus
Spread the fire to the entire house
Und wär weiss, was da nid alles no wär worde drus
And who knows what could have become of it

S'hätt e Brand gäh im Quartier
There would have been a fire in the neighborhood
Und s'hätti d'Fүүrwehr müesse cho
Firefighters would have had to come
S'hätti ghornet i de Strasse
Horns would have sounded in the streets
Und dr Schluuch vom Wage gno
And the hose taken from the vehicle
Und sie hätte Wasser gsprützt
And they would have sprayed water
Und das hätt de glych nüt gnützt
But it wouldn't have helped all the same
Und di ganzi Stadt hätt brönnt, es hätt se nüt meh gschützt
And the whole city would have burned, nothing could have protected it

Und d'Lüt wären umegsprunge
People would have run around
I dr Angscht um Hab und Guet
In fear for their belongings
Hätte gmeint s'heig eine Fүүr gleit
Would have believed someone set a blaze
Hätte ds Sturmgeehr gno ir Wuet
Would have taken their assault rifles
Alls hätt brüelet: Wär isch tschuld?
Everyone would have screamed: who is guilty?
Ds ganze Land i eim Tumult
The whole country in turmoil
Dass me gschosse hätt uf d'Bundesrät am Rednerpult
That people would have shot at the Federal Counselors at the speaker's desk

D'UNO hätt interveniert
The UN would have intervened
Und d'UNO-Gägner sofort o

And the anti-UN fraction immediately also
Für ir Schwyz de Fride z'rette
To save peace in Switzerland
Wäred beid mit Panzer cho
Both would have arrived with tanks
S'hätt sich usdehnt nadisna
It would have spread slowly
Uf Europa, Afrika
To Europe, Africa
S'hätt e Wältchrieg gäh und d'Mönschheit wär jitz nümme da
It would have caused a world war and mankind would have ceased to exist

I han es Zündhölzli azündt
I lit a match
Und das het e Flamme gäh
And it made a flame
Und i ha für d'Zigarette
And for my cigarette
Welle Füür vom Hölzli näh
I wanted to take fire from the match
Aber ds Hölzli isch dervo-
But the match dropped
gspickt und uf de Teppich cho
And landed on the carpet
Gott sei Dank dass is vom Teppich weder furt ha gnoh
Thank God I removed it from the carpet

Listen to "I han es Zündhölzli azündt" in the original version by Mani Matter here:

PS: You can find most of Matter's songs on youtube and his texts in this collection of Matter lyrics.