Twist and Stout!
FOREVER ENSHRINED BY THE BEATLES,
THE CITY OF HAMBURG IS A FAB FORAY INTO
SEX, BEER AND ROCK ‘N’ ROLL.
BY MARK ROZZO  PHOTOGRAPHS BY MONIKA HÖFLER

In April of 1961, an English art-school screw-up and
musician named John Lennon stepped into a doorway in
the St. Pauli neighborhood of Hamburg, Germany, and
had his image snapped by a local photographer named
Jürgen Vollmer. That black-and-white picture is now an iconic symbol
of the days when Lennon and his band — hopped up on Holsten
beer and over-the-counter uppers called Preludin — played marathon
shows, fraternized with strippers and, along the way, became the
Beatles, forever enshrining Hamburg’s improbable place in the rock
cosmology. As Lennon put it, “I grew up in Hamburg, not Liverpool.”

St. Pauli has always been a global capital of louche; its Reeperbahn is
one of Europe’s most notorious red-light districts. The street called
Grosse Freiheit is filled with peep shows, bars and rock clubs, including
a couple made famous by the Beatles in the early ’60s — the Indra
and the Kaiserkeller. Back then, “it was Kicksville,” says the 70-year-old
British guitar slinger Tony Sheridan, who was the Beatles’ mentor.
“The Reeperbahn was a sordid place where seamen came to spend
their money. It was whores and pimps and all the rest. But music really
brightened it up.”

An aura of inspired anarchy remains in St. Pauli, and it’s one
reason why Hamburg is still an European music magnet — Germany’s
Austin or Seattle. By night, the heart of St. Pauli is awash in neon
signage, throbbing techno, jangling indie rock, arty cabarets, strutting
hookers, suburban teens looking to get zonked on 99-cent shots
and an all-purpose international array of partiers. “The mix is so
interesting, with table-dancing places and rock clubs and great
restaurants,” says the 33-year-old singer-songwriter Stefanie Hempel,
who gives Beatles-themed tours of the area. “But even still, there’s a
feeling of a little village.” By day, greater St. Pauli is reassuringly hung
over, a place where artists daub and songwriters strum.

“The whole St. Pauli-Beatles thing, that’s the basis for the Hamburg
sound even now,” Dirk Darmstaedter told me. “There’s a ’60s-ish
mod vibe to Hamburg music.” Darmstaedter is one of Germany’s
underground pop heroes and the cofounder of the influential indie label

Nacht moves
Right: music fans at
a rockabilly party
at Knust. Below, the
Grosse Freiheit, a
street of peep shows
and rock clubs
off the Reeperbahn.
They got the beat

Clockwise from above: a Hamburg hipster; the Astro-Zombies at Knust; the band Warren Suicide at Uebel und Gefährlich; inside the Hanseplatte music store; the crowd at Uebel und Gefährlich; at Kaiserkeller; Grosse Freiheit revelers; in front of Prinzenbar; the singer-songwriter Stefanie Hempel.