

Jens Lekman - From Hammarkullen to Rocky Dennis and Drive-in Bingo (by J. Granström)



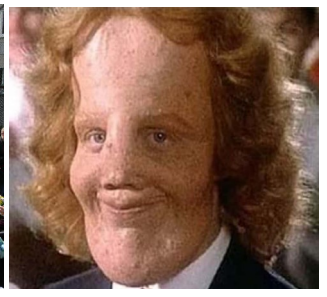
Jens Lekman



Kirsten Dunst



Hammarkullen, Gothenburg



Rocky Dennis

Jens Lekman is a Swedish singer-songwriter who has covered a wide range of topics in his songs, from stalking U.S. Hollywood actress Kirsten Dunst (whose acting credits include Mary Jane Watson in the Spider-Man movies with Tobey Maguire) and the Gothenburg suburb Hammarkullen he grew up in to the facially disfigured Rocky Dennis in the Cher movie "Mask" and drive-in bingos in Sweden. Lekman has topped the Swedish sales charts, toured the United States extensively since 2004 (his canceled Spring 2020 tour with youth orchestras across the country is likely to be re-scheduled one day), been interviewed in the New York Times and performed on National Public Radio (NPR) Tiny Music Desk Concerts. In the latter, he was described as someone "...whose banter falls somewhere between the effortless delivery of a seasoned comic and the nervous rambling of an indie-rock frontman". Lekman's NPR performance included "Waiting On Kirsten" about almost meeting Kirsten Dunst during her visit in Gothenburg. As Lekman told the NPR crew prior to his performance, there was an interview with Kirsten in a Swedish paper and she mentioned that she liked his music. He was trying really hard to not be impressed by that. Lekman and a friend of his ended up at this club where she was supposed show up and found out later that she had tried to get in but couldn't because there was a long line outside. Lekman finished his story by telling the NPR crew that "There aren't any VIP lines in Gothenburg, and you won't get into the club faster because you have the right name, or because you've got money or because you made out with Spider-Man. And I love that, I think that's great, and wish that these basic principles of solidarity would be applied to the rest of society". This story perfectly captures the Swedish perspective in Lekman's songwriting.

A big part of Lekman's world view is related to growing up in Hammarkullen ("Hammer Hill"), a multi-cultural suburb outside of Gothenburg. Many of Lekman's lyrics refer to his background in this type of multi-cultural area, for example "Shirin" about an Iraqi hair-dresser trying to make a living in Sweden. In the song, Lekman sings "When Shirin cuts my hair her mama's sitting in the rocking chair, she tells me stories from the war in Iraq cause they were there, Shirin pulls my head to the side, But in the mirror I can see a tear in her eye". This kind of empathy is common in Lekman's work, which often sympathizes with the outcasts in society. Lekman's rise to fame in Sweden started with the EP "Rocky Dennis" in 2004, about the main character in the movie "Mask". Lekman's EP contains the hauntingly beautiful ballad "Farewell Song To The Blind Girl", about how the facially disfigured Rocky Dennis falls in love with a blind girl at a summer camp for blind children. She falls in love with him too because of his kindness and ability to describe things to her that she cannot see, but her parents do not approve of him, captured by the following lines in Lekman's song as Rocky Dennis "Someday I'll be stuffed in some museum, scaring little kids, with the inscription "Carpe Diem", something I never did".

Jens Lekman - From Hammarkullen...and Drive-in Bingo (by J. Granström) continued



First full-length album



Night Falls Over Kortedala



Swedes at a drive-in bingo

Lekman released his first full-length album “When I Said I Wanted To Be Your Dog” shortly after the “Rocky Dennis” EP in 2004. The album, released in the United States on the label Secretly Canadian, was ranked as the 37th best Swedish album by Sonic Magazine in June 2013. The album contains the upbeat “You Are The Light (By Which I Travel Into This And That)” in which Lekman’s character sings “Yeah, I got busted, so I used my last phone call to dedicate a song to you on the radio”, and a string of beautiful ballads. The most memorable one may be “The Cold Swedish Winter”, where Lekman sings “When people think of Sweden I think they have the wrong idea, like Cliff Richards who thought it was just porn and gonorrhoea, and Lou Reed said in the film “Blue In The Face”, that compared to New York City Sweden was a scary place” only to conclude that the reason for the (perceived) promiscuity is that “The Cold Swedish winter is right outside, and I just need somebody to hold me through the night”.

In 2007, Lekman released his next full length-album “Night Falls Over Kortedala”, which topped the Swedish sales chart and received rave reviews in Sweden and abroad. PopMatters wrote “a first-rate songwriter and the best lyricist this side of Jarvis Cooker and Craig Finn” while the U.K. newspaper The Guardian wrote “audacious and beautiful...pop is rarely as genuinely affecting, joyful or good as this”. The Guardian also ranked it as the 60th best album of the 21st century in 2019, with similar accolades awarded from other media outlets. One of the most memorable songs on the album is “Friday Night At The Drive-In Bingo”, featuring commentary on rural Sweden in general and its drive-in bingo phenomenon in particular. This topic was also covered by The Guardian, citing the following lines from Lekman’s song: “So this is what they do out here for fun? They play bingo and let their engines run? ... Just bring your savings and a bottle of wine / to Friday night’s reversal of time.” Lekman is also interviewed in the article, saying that rural Swedes “...evokes a sense of nostalgia in me - but it’s like a strange nostalgia for a time that never was. I think 1950s America sometimes echoes through Sweden, particularly the rural and smalltown areas, where a lot of people own classic American cars and listen to 1950s American rock. Drive-in bingo seems like a cross between the 1950s American love for drive-ins and the Swedish love for bingo”. From a Swedish multi-cultural suburb to Rocky Dennis and 1950’s America reflected in rural Sweden, Lekman seems to have an innate ability to cover a broad range of topics in his songs with humor, intelligence and empathy.