

Mixing pop and politics: rock music in Czechoslovakia before and after the Velvet Revolution

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Rock and pop music in the USSR and eastern Europe has become an area of increasing interest to both the western mass media and cultural studies since *glasnost*, *perestroika*, the collapse of the Eastern bloc Communist regimes and the constitution of new western-styled democratic governments. This is largely because rock music has represented probably the most widespread vehicle of youth rebellion, resistance and independence behind the Iron Curtain, both in terms of providing an enhanced political context for the often banned sounds of British and American rock, and in the development of home-grown musics built on western foundations but resonating within their own highly charged political contexts. As the East German critic Peter Wicke has claimed,

Because of the intrinsic characteristics of the circumstances within which rock music is produced and consumed, this cultural medium became, in the GDR, the most suitable vehicle for forms of cultural and political resistance that could not be controlled by the state. (Wicke 1991, p. 1)

Wicke goes on to claim that the strategies of resistance devised by rock musicians in the GDR eventually had a direct impact on the political changes which took place there, and similar claims can be made for Czechoslovakia. In his conclusion to the first book-length study of rock music in the USSR and eastern Europe in English, *Rock around the Bloc*, the American critic Timothy W. Ryback depicts the rise of rock and roll over three generations in the USSR and eastern Europe as 'the realization of a democratic process' which forced the authorities to accept rock and pop as a reality rather than a decadent form of western capitalism. Writing in early 1989, before the collapse of the Eastern bloc regimes, Ryback concludes his study:

In the coming years, Soviet-bloc rock faces one final obstacle, perhaps the most difficult one it has yet faced: to make itself heard in the West. . . . As the sounds of rock and roll begin to resonate from East to West, this music which shaped the perceptions and lives of countless millions in the Soviet bloc will hopefully transform the way we in the West view the past and present of our counterparts in the East. (Ryback 1990, pp. 233-4)

From the perspective of 1991, there is little evidence that any such transformation mediated by Soviet rock has taken place. A brief boom in 1989 saw the release on CBS of Boris Grebenshikov's solo LP *Radio Silence*, sung in English (except for one song) and produced by Dave Stewart of the Eurythmics. This flopped, largely because it did not fit into any of the prevalent trends in western pop and was relegated to the status of a curio. Grebenshikov's music with Aquarium, with its

strong Beatles influence, is far more idiosyncratic and meaningful in a Russian context, but too dated by current western pop standards. Similarly, WEA's release of the Moscow heavy metal group Kruiz, produced by Lothar Meid in Munich, had only one song in Russian, but also flopped in the West, while Jon Bon Jovi's all-English production of another Moscow heavy metal group, Gorky Park, formerly The Good Buy, which includes an interesting version of The Who's 'My Generation', was doomed to the bargain bins. Brian Eno's production of Zvuki Mu, a Frank Zappa-influenced jazz-rock group, with songs entirely in Russian, fared slightly better on a more restricted, avant-garde circuit. Their touring companions, the now defunct Avia from Leningrad, released an album in Britain on Hannibal, which rated a four-star review in *Q* magazine, where Ian Cranna described them as an 'odd but insidiously memorable amalgam of nutty ska, mocking Brecht & Weill satire, rousing singalong choruses and rock instrumental improvisation' (*Q*, August 1990). These four releases were virtually the sum total of Russian rock's crossover to the UK, apart from a 1990 release by the independent band Ne Zhdali, whose cabaret-style satirical rock had enlivened the 1989 Glasgow New Beginnings Festival but led Simon Frith to a relatively pessimistic conclusion about the progress of Soviet rock:

Far from a continuing surge of post-glasnost energy, there has been a rapid satiation, a quick awareness of audience boredom. The local Soviet live scenes have collapsed (no longer focuses for other sorts of protest); there are no resources to build a music-making structure independent of either the state or the mafia . . . it's clear already that the most interesting Soviet rock is going to reflect nationalist rather than international concerns. (*Village Voice*, 19 December 1989)

Judged by their western peers, Soviet and eastern European rock groups have not fared well. Brought to the USSR in 1988 for a brief tour which foremost Soviet rock critic Art Troitsky hoped would have as much impact as the Beatles, the postmodern sampling/thrash group Pop Will Eat Itself caused considerable bewilderment, and were in turn somewhat horrified by the music they heard: 'They're all talking about exchanges but how can you tell them that their bands are shit? It's new for them to have us and Billy Bragg here but it wouldn't be interesting for British people to see something that was being done 20 years ago' (*New Musical Express*, 11 June 1988). Any sympathetic appraisal of the state of rock and pop in the USSR and eastern Europe needs to consider the political and cultural context of deprivation, censorship, enforced clandestinity and isolation in which the music has been forced to operate, from the use of X-ray plates for making bootleg records in the 1960s, to the function of rock groups as 'live jukeboxes' playing banned western rock music, to the circulation of illegal *magnizidat* tapes of 'unofficial' bands. This has forced much of the music to function primarily as political statement, even when the main concerns of the musicians were, as the Leningrad group Kino claimed in 1985 on a French television programme *Rock Around the Kremlin*, merely to make fashion statements. As Troitsky has pointed out: 'Most of the Soviet rock acts were ordinary-looking and ordinary-sounding, but singing something very meaningful in their native language.' (Troitsky 1989, p. 6)

Peter Wicke (1991, p. 7) has explained how the tendency of the GDR authorities to read political meanings into the most innocuous of pop songs influenced audiences, who likewise read political dimensions into songs where often none was intended. But in a situation where authorities exert political pressure on music, often the very absence of political statement can be seen as a political

expression of notions of freedom, desire or pleasure associated with western capitalism. In Czechoslovakia rock and pop music has had this type of entanglement with politics since the 1940s, and it continues to do so in the present climate of liberal social humanism presided over by Václav Havel, an unashamed rock music fan.

The Velvet Underground and the Velvet Revolution

The close connection between rock music and politics in Czechoslovakia is demonstrated in Havel's essay 'The Power of the Powerless', where he states that the Charter 77 movement may not have taken place were it not for a campaign which he and others launched against the trial and imprisonment of the underground rock group, the Plastic People of the Universe:

Unknown young people who wanted no more than to be able to live within the truth, to play the music they enjoyed, to sing songs that were relevant to their lives, and to live freely in dignity and partnership . . . Everyone understood that an attack on the Czech musical underground was an attack on an elementary and important thing, something that in fact bound everyone together: it was an attack on the very notion of 'living within the truth', on the real aims of life. The freedom to play rock music was understood as a human freedom and thus as essentially the same as the freedom to engage in philosophical and political reflection, the freedom to write, the freedom to express and defend the various social and political interests of society . . . Who could have foreseen that the prosecution of one or two obscure rock groups would have such far-reaching consequences? (Vladislav 1989, pp. 63-5)

Far more than a merely symbolic representation of freedom of expression, the Plastic People were an embodiment of Havel's notion of 'living in truth'. The group borrowed its name from a song by Frank Zappa about phonies and hypocrites which lampooned the President of the USA, but their unconcern about being identified with the song's targets is indicative of the strong musical influence which Zappa exerted on avant-garde and underground rock throughout the USSR and eastern Europe. In 1990 Havel, a long-standing fan of Zappa and Captain Beefheart's 1975 album *Bongo Fury*, appointed Zappa as a special adviser on trade, culture and tourism to the Czech government, causing some embarrassment to the American ambassador to Prague, Shirley Temple. The appointment was not so much a theatrical impulse by the playwright Havel which matched the theatricalisation of politics in the USA, as evidence of Havel's commitment to redressing the cultural deprivation of Czech youth. Zappa's appointment drew sympathetic comment from *The Economist's* Prague correspondent, who commented on the proliferation of pop musicians and disc jockeys in the Civic Forum administration, and on the centrality of rock music to Czech politics, in a way which rehearses traditional arguments about generational conflict and rebellion against officialdom:

In Czechoslovakia's peculiar circumstances, this is not as ridiculous as it seems. Rock first began to gather power in the mid-1970s, when Czechoslovak society had settled into the apathy from which no one, least of all the people themselves, ever thought it would emerge. A new crop of rebellious young, wanting to annoy their elders, found rock music the ideal means. It was not part of the official culture; it was not aired on radio or television . . . All sorts of people who might, in other circumstances, have devoted their creative energies to other things gave themselves to rock as an island of independent expression. Even the musically disinterested were drawn to these secret gigs for the same reasons the government so disapproved of them – because they were there. Among these people was a playwright who is now a president. (*The Economist*, 3 February 1990, p. 91)

This rhetorical portrayal of Czech rock as a surrogate form of countercultural dissident activity compensating for the lack of other outlets for oppositional political activity underestimates the passion with which rock music is pursued as a cultural practice in its own right by young people in eastern Europe, where distinctions between high culture and popular culture have been eroded due to the support for rock music expressed by artists, writers and philosophers, who are in some cases the authors of its lyrics. When Havel sponsored a free concert by the Rolling Stones in August 1990 at Prague's Spartakiadni Stadium, which has a capacity of 250,000, *The Economist's* correspondent became more censorious. A photo of Havel with Mick Jagger, captioned 'It's only rock 'n' roll, but Havel likes it', set the tone of the report:

His fondness for skateboards and the Rolling Stones may not be enough to carry Czechoslovakia through the tough economic times ahead, particularly if Mr Havel continues to let his own doubts about capitalism hamper his country's reforms. (*The Economist*, 8 August 1990, p. 63)

In terms of the hard-line economic *realpolitik* many western observers and advisers are attempting to impose on eastern European countries, Havel's cultural policy of compensating for the historic lack of access by Czech youth to significant aspects of western pop music history is seen as an irresponsible frivolity on a par with his rumoured habit of travelling around the interior of Prague castle on a skateboard. But some of the Czech youth who flocked to see the Stones were no longer very young, and their gratitude was immense, if the testimony of the forty-three-year-old drummer of the Czech band who supported the Stones is any indication: 'It's a dream come true, something I never hoped to see in my life' (*Sydney Sun-Herald*, 19 August 1990).

Havel also invited Lou Reed to give a concert in Prague in 1990, in acknowledgment of the influence Reed's band of the late 1960s, the Velvet Underground, had on the Plastic People and the Czech rock scene as a whole. Reed reciprocated by interviewing Havel for *Rolling Stone* (although the magazine later spiked the interview) and was surprised by the impact of his music: 'I found out how much the Velvet Underground has meant to those people in Eastern Europe all those years ago. They were out there listening to us, only we just didn't know it' (*NME*, 5 May 1990). Reed invited Půlnoc (Midnight), a band formed in 1988 from the remnants of the Plastic People, some of whose founder members had been forced to emigrate, to play at the Cartier Foundation festival for Andy Warhol near Paris in June 1990. As Ryback reports (1990, p. 145), the Plastic People had staged a 'Homage to Andy Warhol' in 1972, when they played covers of Velvet Underground songs, and Půlnoc had already toured the USA in April 1989, without creating much of an impact. Even under Reed's tutelage, they fared little better, being upstaged by a dramatic and apparently spontaneous ten minute reunion of the Velvet Underground for the first time in twenty years in a performance of their most famous song 'Heroin'. Ellen Willis of the *Village Voice* was unimpressed by Půlnoc's performance: 'the Velvets have informed [Půlnoc's] revolutionary zeal, but not, apparently, their music, which doesn't make it' (*Village Voice*, 3 July 1990, p. 74). This echoes numerous other dismissals of Eastern bloc rock in the western popular music press, where little attempt is made to consider its history of technological and informational deprivation.

1989/1968

One of the main symbols of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia was the inversion of the year 1989 into 1968, evoking the Prague Spring and a return to the democratic principles of the Dubček government. Re-creating the output of a suppressed past where freedom of expression was possible has become the main sustaining force of Czech culture since 1989: theatres are full of formerly banned plays by Havel and other dissident playwrights, while art galleries exhibit previously censored artists and political cartoonists. Pop musicians can now perform covers of Beatles and Rolling Stones songs on the streets, and there is even a flourishing bluegrass and country and western movement with an estimated 200 bands in Prague alone. According to Joseph Vunhal, the manager of a new country music club in Prague: 'There is a huge following for country and western music . . . Part of the reason for its popularity is that it was seen as a form of protest music. It is not political, but because it is American, just listening to it and dressing in country and music gear was a form of protest' (*The European*, March 1991). This reconstitution of American culture of the 1960s as a form of cultural freedom of expression has been acknowledged and endorsed by President Havel: 'There are numerous parallels between the '60s in America and Czechoslovakia in the '80s. I could illustrate with hundreds of cases, but I feel the soul of the '60s is being revived by us here today' (*Village Voice*, 16 January 1990, p. 74). Havel cites as evidence the impact of a Joan Baez concert in Bratislava in August 1989, when according to the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* (6 June 1990), Baez hid him from police in her hotel room after the authorities had turned the power off when she tried to introduce a Czech dissident singer. 'We Shall Overcome' is still the most potent protest anthem in Prague, as Billy Bragg discovered on his tour of eastern Europe in May 1990:

Sometimes it looks like Czechoslovak pop culture went into deep freeze when the tanks came in 1968. It was the year of 'Yellow Submarine', Apple Corp and the politics of psychedelic optimism . . . Instead of the 'Internationale' I sing the song they sang on all their demonstrations, 'We Shall Overcome'. When I finish, the audience rises and sings a verse in Czech. A wonderful moment. (*New Statesman and Society*, 22 June 1990)

One indication of the endurance of this 1960s spirit of Apple Corp and 'psychedelic optimism' is the continuing adulation of John Lennon, whose death in 1980 had arguably more impact in Czechoslovakia than it did in the West. The 'Wailing Wall' in the Malá Strana on which the youth of Prague painted slogans, pictures and quotations from Lennon's lyrics, defying the whitewash of the authorities, continues to exist, and Havel's interpretation of Lennon's death in his *Letters to Olga* has political dimensions few in the West would entertain:

his death so compellingly reaches out beyond itself, as though there were latent in it more tragic connections, problems and aspects pointing to the present world crisis than in any other event. It might even be called 'the death of the century' (perhaps more so than the deaths of Kennedy and King) . . . And you can't help feeling that the shot was fired by the reality of the 80s at one of the departing dreams – the dream of the sixties for peace, freedom and brotherhood, the dream of the flower children, the communes, the LSD trips and 'making love not war', a shot as it were in the face of that existential revolution of the 'third consciousness' and 'the greening of America' (Havel 1989, pp. 149, 167).

A recent French compilation record of Soviet punk rock was entitled *From Lenin to Lennon*, and just as 'Let it Be' has been used as a political anthem in Romania,

Beatles' songs are regarded in Czechoslovakia as expressions of political freedom and community. 'Lennon Lives' can still be seen as a slogan on the T-shirts of people too young to have heard the Beatles the first time around.

The Velvet Revolution has re-instated banned Czech folk singers of the 1960s: records by Marta Kubišová and Karel Kryl are sold by students in Prague from street stalls, along with books by Havel and Josef Škvorecký. Kubišová, the most famous 'silenced singer' of the 1960s, is enjoying a comeback at the age of fifty, and her most famous song, 'Prayer for Marta', an anthem for peace and freedom used as the signature tune for a clandestine programme broadcast on Czech television in the autumn of 1968, is once again popular. Another of her songs, 'Ring o Ding', which invokes the sound of the ringing of bells of freedom and the end of oppression, became an anthem of the Velvet Revolution, accompanied by the jangling of keys by crowds, simulating the sound of bells.

SOS Rassismus – rock against racism and for democracy

Kubišová sang both the above mentioned songs at a concert entitled 'SOS Rassismus' which was held in the old Town Hall Square in Prague on the eve of the June 1990 elections. These were the first free elections held in Czechoslovakia for fifty years, and brought a landslide victory for the Civic Forum Coalition party headed by Havel. The concert was telecast in Paris and Moscow and organised by the French radio station Radio Europe 2, which had become the first commercial radio broadcaster in Czechoslovakia, offering a bland mixture of old 1960s hits and 1970s middle-of-the-road rock together with advertisements for non-smoking and counter-pollution measures. 'SOS Rassismus' demonstrated some of the complexities and contradictions of popular music's role in political events in a way which illustrates the *a priori* politicisation of pop and rock in Czechoslovakia and eastern Europe as a whole.

The concert was headlined by Les Negresses Vertes, an internationally popular World Music group from Paris whose blend of traditional Celtic music, rock and Algerian Rai has drawn comparison with the Irish folk-punk group the Pogues. For the Prague audience, however, the main drawcard was Michael Kocáb. A member of Havel's administration, Kocáb was responsible for negotiating the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Czechoslovakia, but he was also the most popular rock musician in the country. The volume of the roar with which the audience acknowledged his appearance, immediately after the V-signs and key-and flag-waving which concluded Marta Kubišová's set, prompted her to reappear under the mistaken impression that she was being called back for a special encore. Kocáb also has dissident credentials; Josef Škvorecký (1984, p. 33) has noted that his 'excellent experimental jazzrock orchestra . . . Prague Selection (Pražský výběr)' was banned by the Ministry of Culture in 1983. His current group played an up-tempo, seventies-style blend of hard rock and symphonic space-rock the datedness of which by western standards was illustrated by Kocáb's keyboard-guitar. Three Czech women singers with contrasting styles opened the concert: Dagmar Andrtová sang with a high, lilting folk-style voice and played abrasive, attacking chords on an acoustic guitar; Iva Bittová scat-sang to extraordinary effect and played solo violin, evoking Laurie Anderson without her extensive electronic technology, although her 1989 Panton album *Dunaj* (Danube) sounds more like a blend of Grace Slick and Nina Hagen; Lenka Filipová, who is based in France, sang relatively

bland pop songs in French to a backing tape made up of samples and a drum machine. They were followed by Točkolotoč, a Czech version of the Gipsy Kings; English singer Murray Head, of 'Jesus Christ Superstar' and 'One Night in Bangkok' fame, who delivered a couple of ballads to a backing tape; and black American soul singer Dee Dee Bridgewater, who was the only performer to mention the Velvet Revolution.

It may have been possible for an audience to believe that the concert's only political agenda was a series of generalised statements about racism by the compere, who targeted skinheads as culprits, but only until Kocáb announced a 'surprise appearance' by an exhausted President Havel, who had been carefully informing foreign media that he was not engaged in any form of campaign for Civic Forum. Havel gave a brief and very hoarse denunciation of racism before announcing another 'surprise' guest, Paul Simon, who performed 'The Boxer', 'Bridge over Troubled Water' and 'Sounds of Silence' to a delighted crowd, accompanying himself on acoustic guitar. Havel's 'gift' to the audience probably surpassed any direct political statement about the elections which he might have made. As an advertisement for the uncensored cultural politics of Civic Forum, the concert, which concluded with a long set by Kocáb, was made more effective politically by its lack of any reference to the election, demonstrating a humanist cultural policy where political concerns no longer needed to be foregrounded. As Wicke has commented:

The aesthetic nature of rock music is of far-reaching importance for any political involvement with it. It is not only that behind this music lie very contradictory and socially conflicting cultural processes, but the music itself is also not to be taken as a textual embodiment of ideology, an ideological text, however deeply it is linked to contexts which determine the apparatus of the production of ideology. (Wicke 1990, p. 182)

The SOS Rassismus concert, with its absence of skinheads or punks, its Hare Krishna stall selling vegetarian food, and despite its anti-racist rationale, and the highly 'ideological' appearances of Marta Kubišová and Michael Kocáb, representing the 'old' 1968 Prague Spring and the 'new' democracy of the Velvet Revolution respectively, was a celebration of a newly-won democratic freedom in which popular music can at last assume a non-ideological role. This freedom is, of course, predicated on a long history of enforced politicisation and political suppression of popular music.

Jazz, pop and rock in Czechoslovakia: a brief history

In August 1947 the Australian jazz pianist Graeme Bell and his Dixieland Jazz Band performed at a World Youth Festival in Prague and generated the first Czech Dixieland jazz movement, which set a precedent for other American-derived forms of popular music. As Josef Škvorecký recalls in the preface to his novella *The Bass Saxophone*:

although the bishops of Stalinist obscurantism damned the 'music of the cannibals', they had one problem. Its name was Dixieland. A type of the cannibal-music with roots so patently folkloristic and often (the blues) so downright proletarian that even the most Orwellian falsifier of facts would be hard put to deny them. Initiates had already encountered isolated recordings of Dixieland during the war, and after it ended a group of youths heard the Graeme Bell Dixieland Band . . . (Škvorecký 1978, p. 16)

Bell's band was prevailed upon to stay for a four-month tour of Czechoslovakia,

and recorded a series of 78s of jazz standards for the state record label Ultraphon, as well as two original compositions, *Czechoslovak Journey* and *Walking Wenceslaus Square* (reissued in Australia in 1981 as an LP entitled *Czechoslovak Journey 1947*). Bell has described the thirst for jazz in Czechoslovakia at the time:

We were told that we were the first jazz band to come to Prague; the Czechs were starved of jazz. There was not one American record of any description for sale there. If one somehow got hold of a record, one was obliged to let every collector in Prague hear it. Reaction to the straight-out commercialism of the local bands brought about the formation of three or four groups who were trying to play jazz at home. These came to hear us each night. (Bell 1988, p. 89).

The mixture of starvation and passion with which the freedom of expression of jazz and later rock and roll was pursued in eastern Europe in the 1950s was obstructed by what the Hungarian critic Anna Szemere has described as 'the view . . . according to which almost all Afro-American popular genres, whether jazz or rock 'n' roll or the twist, were considered nothing but the cultural trash of decadent imperialism' (Szemere 1983, p. 122). In *The Bass Saxophone*, Škvorecký describes ten restrictions imposed by Nazi authorities on dance orchestras in eastern Europe, against fox-trots, minor keys, blues tempos, syncopation, trumpet mutes, brushes, drum solos, plucked double-basses, pizzicatos, scat singing and saxophones. He comments that almost identical restrictions were imposed under Stalinism, which has consequently ensured that an underground popular music culture has existed in eastern Europe since the Second World War. In his essay 'Hipness at Noon' (1984) he outlines the activities of the Jazz Section of the Czech Musicians' Union. Through an administrative loophole, this managed to operate as a vital clandestine cultural force from its formation in 1971 to its banning in 1983. As well as assisting rock groups and publishing books on popular music (including a history of western punk rock) it published works by banned Czech novelists and poets, providing further proof of an absence of differentiation between popular music and products of 'high' culture.

Havel indicates that the advent of rock and roll in Czechoslovakia was as culturally significant as the jazz era. In his nostalgic description of concerts at the Reduta Theatre in Prague in 1956 and 1957 by the Akord Klub, he writes:

It was in fact the first – or, rather, the first well-known – rock band in Czechoslovakia, and it was an enormously interesting and important phenomenon. . . . At their late-night concerts in Reduta they played famous rock-and-roll tunes for which they had written their own lyrics, and they played their own compositions as well . . . The room would only hold sixty people, but all of Prague, if I can put it that way, was jammed in . . . it didn't take much expertise to understand that what they were playing and singing here was fundamentally different from 'Kristynka' or 'Prague Is a Golden Ship'. The novelty was not only in the music, in the rhythms of rock and roll, which was something new here then, but above all in the lyrics . . . they reminded no one of the banal lyricism of the official hits. The atmosphere in Reduta was marvellous, and what was born in those sessions was that very special, conspiratorial sense of togetherness that to me is what makes theatre. (Havel 1990, pp. 42-3)

Havel compares the songs of the Akord Klub's bass player, Jiří Suchý, to the satirical cabaret of the Liberated Theatre of Voskovec and Werich between the wars, and Suchý, whom Ryback refers to as 'the Czech Elvis' (1990, p. 25), went on to team up with Jiří Šlitr in 'East Europe's most brilliant songwriting and stage team' (*ibid.* p. 38), performing satirical revues and musical comedies. This highlights what is a particularly common feature of much rock music in the USSR and eastern Europe: a tendency towards satirical cabaret and rock and roll pastiche,

which is evident in Soviet groups like Zvuki Mu, Avia and the Secrets, or even the Slovenian group Laibach's rendition of the Beatles' 'Let it Be'. It is a feature which Paul Berman, writing on American cultural influences on Czechoslovakia in the *Village Voice*, finds questionable:

The relations between American and European rock may be murkier than is sometimes supposed. It is my impression that Euro-rockers get onstage with the proper instruments and the right look, but with ideas that are often as not geared for cabaret more than dancing. They show too much interest in poetry and theatre, not enough in African-derived rhythmic sophistication; too much profundity, not enough groove. Melancholy cynicism, the European disease, oozes from the amplifiers. (*Village Voice*, 20 November 1990, p. 48)

Havel's impressions of the Akord Club reflect a close connection between Czech pop and theatre. This suggests an intellectual, artistic orientation in popular music derived from an appropriation of western musical forms and styles which are detached from their social and political origins, and pastiched and redirected into a more self-conscious cultural context. When this new cultural context comes under threat of censorship, the music takes on a social and political dimension which may be quite different from that of its root forms. Berman's misgivings about European rock stem from a dislocation between the music's western origins and its eastern re-location. But in the case of punk rock, there was frequently a confluence between its 'dole queue rock' context in London in 1977 (disregarding its art school fashion dimensions) and its relocation and appropriation in eastern Europe. Ryback, for example (1990, pp. 181ff) suggests that the explosion of punk rock in Poland in the early 1980s was a direct result of Jaruzelski's imposition of martial law in 1981. The Plastic People of the Universe, on the other hand, applied the ideals of the libertarian hippie music of California of the 1960s, and 'concept albums' like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, but combined these with the more avant-garde musical influence of Zappa, Beefheart and the Velvet Underground, which they transposed into a cabaret format – Ryback's book contains a photo of them performing at the F-Club in Prague in 1969 dressed in togas.

The artistic director of the Plastic People of the Universe, Ivan Jirous, whose notion of a 'parallel' or alternative underground culture Havel uses in his writings, and who is now a member of the Havel administration, has placed the Plastic People in what he has called the 'third Czech musical revival', which he locates in 1973. While the first phase covers rock and roll, he places the second musical revival in the late 1960s, when the Beatles-influenced 'bigbit' (big beat) boom occurred, and there were several hundred rock groups in Prague alone (Jirous 1983). This coincides with the 'big beat' boom in the USSR which Artemy Troitsky has described in his book *Back in the USSR*; the first rock music concert in the Soviet Union took place in 1966 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Troitsky records that the first Czechoslovakian 'bigbit' festival was in November 1967, and describes the popular music scene in Prague at the time:

In Prague everything was simple. There were several clubs in the centre of the city (Sunshine, F-club, Olympic), and every week there were concerts by beat groups. The Matadors played like the Yardbirds, The Rebels played 'west coast', Framus-5 played r 'n' b and the Olympics sang in Czech in Beatle style. (Troitsky 1987, p. 22)

Beat music was also flourishing in the late 1960s in Hungary, as Anna Szemere has described (1983, pp. 121-5), and there was a strong 'big beat' music in Poland which Marek Garzdecki has linked to early 1960s rock and roll – the first Polish

national rock competition took place as early as 1962. Most of the beat groups which emerged during this eastern European 'second revival' imitated Anglo-American models, and performed songs in English, although Garztecki provides evidence of a strong Polish song movement which 'served to defuse mounting criticism of the "poisonous English scream" from the musical establishment' (NME, 9 January 1982, pp. 14-15). Many of these eastern European beat groups, as Szemere puts it (1983, p. 122), 'met with considerable suspicion from distrustful, sometimes hostile local cultural and media institutions', rarely got the opportunity to record, and suffered a precarious existence as live performers.

The Plastic People: a brief history

Jirous (1976, p. 32) has described the emergence of an 'underground' rock scene in Prague in the late 1960s. The psychedelic group, the Primitives, played covers of songs by Jimi Hendrix, the Animals, the Grateful Dead, the Doors, Zappa's Mothers of Invention and the Fugs, among others. When the Primitives split up in 1969, the Plastic People inherited their role as representatives of underground rock. The band were never allowed professional status, but from 1970 to 1972 their lead vocalist was Paul Wilson, a Canadian English teacher working in Prague who subsequently translated much of the work of Havel, Škvorčeký and other prominent Czech authors into English. In the early 1970s, the Plastic People resisted pressure from the authorities to de-Americanise and de-Anglicise their name and repertoire, and for a period were virtually the only underground band in Bohemia, being forbidden to play in public, and forced to play at private parties at venues such as Havel's farmhouse in northern Bohemia (where they later recorded their album *Passion Play*). As British playwright Tom Stoppard has recounted, restrictions against rock music were part of the normalisation process undertaken by the Husak regime, which involved expelling 400,000 people from the Czech Communist Party and purging schools and universities:

Along with all this, from 1971, there was a 'normalisation' of the musicians as well: no more long hair, no more lyrics sung in English, no more Western decadence, no pessimism, no funk, just good, clean, middle-of-the-road music. (Stoppard 1977, p. 12)

Even middle-of-the-road singers like Karel Gott, who might be described as Czechoslovakia's answer to Cliff Richard, was pressurised in 1970 into purging his repertoire of any western rock influences, and having his hair cut (Ryback 1990, pp. 142-3).

The Plastic People persevered with its utopian, libertarian inclinations in clandestinity, playing songs based on poems by Blake, Spenser and the post-war Czech romantic poet Jiří Kolář. As in the USSR, only 'official' or professional rock and pop groups were permitted to record and give state-approved public concerts which were vetted by cultural commissars of the Union of Composers; 'unofficial' or amateur groups had to resign themselves to illegal gigs for groups of friends. Many 'unofficial' groups capitulated to state demands and began playing mainstream, Abba-style Europop, or sought work in the USSR, but the Plastic People resolved, in Jirous' words, that 'it is better not to play at all than to play music that does not flow from one's convictions. It is better not to play at all than to play what the establishment demands' (Jirous 1976, p. 34). By 1973, when official pressure eased somewhat, the underground rock scene had begun to re-emerge,

and the Plastic People played at exhibitions and parties, performing songs by the banned poet Egon Bondy, who belonged to an older generation than the musicians, but whose work contained an abrasive, scatological edge. (Both Bondy and Jirous were part of a delegation of Czech writers who attended a conference on Czechoslovakian Literature and Culture at New York University in April 1990 – a further indication of the important role rock music plays in official post-Velvet Revolution Czech and Slovak culture.) None of the band's material was overtly political, however; as their saxophonist Vratislav Brabenec has explained:

We were involved in an unequal fight, but that was never our intention. We never liked singing protest songs. The conflict was artificially engineered by the police and the state apparatus . . . As regards being romantic heroes, I saw us more as madmen. We certainly experienced more fear than romance. (Brabenec 1983, pp. 31-2)

The group's first recording, *Egon Bondy's Lonely Hearts Club Banned*, produced in London without their knowledge from tapes made in 1973 and 1974, consists entirely of songs with lyrics by Bondy. The handwritten, uncredited sleeve notes (in my cassette copy so faint as to be barely legible, but with abbreviations, cross-ings out and mistakes in English that suggest a Czech hand) explain:

The P.P.'s musical mentors were F. Zappa, Capt. Beefheart, the Fugs and Velv. Underground and something of these influences can be heard in their music. But they've never tried, as so many groups in Eastern Europe do, simply to import Western rock into an alien scene. Over the years they have developed mature and original style of their own [*sic*]. Their music and Bondy's lyrics [*sic*] are saturated with atmosphere of Prague [*sic*], a city where the music and the mundane, the absurd and the real, mingle in everyday life. This record is not a cry of protest. It's a deliberate statement of what is possible in what seems to be an impossible situation.

The album begins with a song entitled '20', in which guitar, violin and saxophone play in unison a dirge-like sequence, while the vocalist intones Bondy's lyrics in an angst-ridden howl:

Today when one is twenty/He would vomit with repulsion
But those of forty even more/would puke in sheer revulsion
Only those of sixty have it easier/They sleep in peace with their amnesia.

For those born in the 1950s, like the Plastic People's generation, the song suggests, the Prague Spring had provided the only glimmer of a life outside the grey, state-imposed conformity of totalitarianism, while those of Bondy's generation had borne witness to the Nazi era and the Soviet invasion of Hungary. Those old enough to have lived through the foundation of modern Czechoslovakia in 1918 and the brief period of democracy between the wars under Tomas Masaryk, the song implies, have long given up hope of alternatives to a Stalinist regime. '20' expresses a bleakness, and a sense of 'no future' for young people which anticipate the nihilist anger of punk, but hint at a desire for social and cultural change similar to that described by Peter Wicke in rock music in the GDR: 'It was the almost total lack of an attractive and stimulating cultural life within the mainstream of everyday experience for the majority of the population that constituted the concrete impetus for radical and fundamental social change' (Wicke 1991, p. 2). The album contains songs with titles like 'Constipation', 'Toxic', and 'Look at You, All Sound Asleep' which express a despair and disgust reflected in the obsessively repetitive, Velvet Underground-like rhythms of the music, and the raucous, snarling, even cough-

ing, vocals. But a more hippie-like, magical and optimistic streak emerges in songs like 'The Wondrous Mandarin' and 'Magic Nights':

The time of magic/Night has come/Koch's possessed, Delirium/
We live in Prague/That's where the spirit itself will/
One day appear/We live in Prague/That is where.

This lyricism combines with free-flowing, echoing saxophone and violin solos which recall 1970s 'progressive rock' groups like The Fugs or The Flock, as well as a free jazz influence, while the 'dirty' but intricate guitar solos are similar to those of Frank Zappa.

The Plastic People's second album, *Passion Play*, was released in Canada in 1980, and is even less comfortable than the first, the anger and anguish even more pronounced. It is a 'concept album' which follows the format of Christ's passion, with lyrics based on the Old Testament. It may even be an allegorical expression of the group's own persecution, as well as reflecting the widespread impact and influence which *Jesus Christ Superstar* had all over eastern Europe and in the USSR. *Passion Play* was composed by saxophonist Vratislav Brabenec, and first performed live at Václav Havel's farm in Hrádeček. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation broadcast it as *The Hrádeček Passion* in March 1980, probably due to the influence of Paul Wilson, whose translations of the Czech lyrics are printed on the record's inner sleeve. Ten musicians are credited as taking part in the recording and performance. The avant-garde jazz-rock style, which uses sax, electric piano, viola, violin, bass viol and percussion, is reminiscent of 1970s British and European jazz-rock fusion groups like Henry Cow, Slapp Happy and Faust, while the Zappa and Beefheart influences are still discernible, especially in the vocals of bass player Milan Hlavsa. But Zappa's grotesquely comic satires against middle America are transformed into anguished cries against oppression in which revolt is not, as in much western underground rock, dictated by style. But the lyrics of the Plastic People's songs contain few, if any, direct political references, and dissent is detectable only in the general scatological, angry and occasionally religious tone of their songs.

Havel has recounted how he met Jirous in 1976, read his 'Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival', and listened to tapes of the Plastic People and DG 307, another banned underground group named, as Ryback explains, 'after a medical designation for a psychological disorder' (1990, p. 146). Havel's account indicates a unification of rock music and 'alternative' political philosophies and lifestyles under totalitarianism which reflects American hippie philosophy but reveals a cultural *praxis* occurring only rarely in the West:

Although I'm no expert on rock music, I immediately felt that there was something rather special radiating from these performances, that they were not just deliberately oddball or dilettantish attempts to be outlandish at any price, as what I had heard about them might have suggested: the music was a profoundly authentic expression of the sense of life amongst these people, battered as they were by the misery of the world. There was disturbing magic in the music, and a kind of inner warning. (Havel 1990, p. 126)

Stoppard (1977) has described how the Plastic People's policy of non-compromise and of working for the benefit of others inspired a number of other underground bands to form, and in February 1976 the largest illegal 'underground' rock event in Czechoslovakia took place in a village outside Prague. The occasion was Ivan Jirous' wedding, and more than a dozen groups performed for over 400 people. As

a result, at least twenty-seven musicians from five groups were arrested, and musical equipment, tapes, films and photos were confiscated by the police. The musicians were charged with 'creating public disturbances' and 'singing indecent songs'. Seven of the musicians received prison sentences, including Jirous, who was jailed for eighteen months, and Paul Wilson was expelled from Czechoslovakia. The chasm of communication between dissident rock music in eastern Europe and the British punk movement of the time is shown by Wilson's account of how he attempted to interest a member of the Sex Pistols' entourage in smuggling a copy of the group's film *The Great Rock and Roll Swindle* into Czechoslovakia in an attempt to boost the morale of the Plastic People:

'The Plastic People?' he responded in a dead-eyed, cocky public school whine. 'They're antisocialist. I don't support fascist rock bands. I'd rather send the film to South Africa.' Ah yes, images of Sid Vicious smelling his socks to raise consciousness in Soweto. I was sorry I'd asked. (Škvorecký 1984, p. 34)

When punk rock and heavy metal eventually reached Czechoslovakia, they were subjected to intensive government suppression. In 1983 records by the heavy metal group Kiss were banned, reportedly because the double 's' in the group's name was seen as an SS logo. The music critic of the Communist Party newspaper *Tribuna*, Jan Kryzl, wrote an attack on heavy metal and punk rock, denouncing it as 'primitive', 'hideous', 'provocative' and 'obscene':

It is no coincidence that so-called punk and new wave has been disseminated in our republic by Western radio stations and other means . . . the aim being pursued by foreign intelligence agencies is two-fold: Firstly to introduce our young people to this musical trash, and secondly to then form bands here suggesting that this is part of a new 'wave' sweeping the world. These bands are meant to produce music which is antithetical to all aesthetic and moral norms. (Casey 1984)

Such condemnations of foreign musical influences appear routine when compared with events like the 'Budějovice massacre' in 1974, when police attacked and beat up hundreds of young people waiting for a concert at which the Plastic People were to appear, or the police bulldozing the Hermanice farmhouse where the group rehearsed, or arresting and sentencing Ivan Jirous for the fourth time in 1982, or setting fire in 1984 to the house in Rychnov where they performed. By this time the Plastic People had effectively been decimated, but their importance in public memory is clear from the widespread criticism which ensued when Půlnoc attempted to revive their music in a more official context in 1988.

The Prague music scene since the Velvet Revolution

Despite the euphoria of the elections, Prague in June 1990 appeared to offer few amusements for young people, many of whom hung about on street corners, some with ghetto blasters playing western rock or rap. Even the apparently spontaneous music events on the streets were subject to curfews, and records and tapes by English and American rock groups in the record shops seemed unaffordable when they were available. (Locally produced recordings cost about 65 korunas – or less than one pound – but imported records could cost anything up to ten times that amount.) Discos operated on Wenceslas Square mainly for tourists, there were posters for a few sporadic rock and jazz events, and a number of folk and rock bands played in the streets, but the atmosphere remained subdued in comparison

to western European cities in summer. One T-shirt slogan made a statement about the plight of young people in Prague: 'Franz Kafka didn't have much fun here either'. But an article in the monthly pop culture magazine *i-D* by Yugoslav journalist Vanja Balogh unearthed signs of life among young pop and rock fans which were not apparent to the casual tourist. At the student-run 007 Club near Prague Castle, music by groups such as Public Enemy and the Pogues could be heard, and the skateboarders frequenting the courtyard opposite the Prague National Theatre – where Havel's first play *The Garden Party* was playing – expressed enthusiasm about the Beastie Boys and Run DMC, but told her:

The only place to go out at nights is the 007 but that is only on Saturdays. So we usually end up coming here after cruising the city. Prague is boring. The thing to do these days is go home and paint your jeans. Music-wise there is very little information about what is going on outside, but we know about acid house and rap. (Balogh 1990, p. 51)

A number of cheaply-produced underground rock and pop fanzines showed that there was not a total information gap. Apart from the long-standing 'official' pop monthly *Melodie*, both *Rock Music* and *Rock Noviny* had cover stories on Lou Reed's recent tour, while another xeroxed magazine, *Trip*, featured the highly-regarded Belgian avant-garde and dance music label Play It Again Sam, and translations of articles from *Melody Maker* by Simon Reynolds and others. *Trip's* cover story was about The Young Gods, the post-punk, post-industrial Swiss exponents of a New Sonic Architecture whose use of sampling is seen by Reynolds, one of the leading British writers on postmodern popular music, as having 'reconstructed rock':

The Young Gods are remorselessly Futurist. They are an implicit reproach to the underlying pessimism (often lazy cynicism) which you'll often find among samplers, the sad idea that we've reached the end of pop's book, and that all that's left to do is flick through the pages, let the brassiest moments flash before our eyes. (Reynolds 1990, pp. 169, 170)

That a Prague fanzine was *au fait* with this corner of the rock avant-garde suggests that lack of records and technology rather than information is the main source of any deprivation.

Given the boredom described by some of Prague's youth, punk rock clearly continues to fulfil an important function. As one Prague punk told Anna Kashia Natya of the French magazine *Photo*: 'Being a punk in Prague . . . is more authentic than anywhere else in Europe, because here there is really "no future"' (*Photo*, February 1990, p. 56). The first 'official' punk rock concert in Prague was held in the Palace of Culture in January 1990, and the first-ever punk convention took place in April 1990, but as a Czech photographer told Balogh: 'There were hundreds of punks with outrageous hairstyles and dirty clothes . . . Punks still can't walk the streets in their full anarchist gear, but they have survived and sometimes you can see them in certain spots in the city' (Balogh 1990, p. 49). In April 1990 Monitor, a new independent record label, released *Rebelie*, the first-ever 'official' compilation of Czech punk and oi music, featuring seven groups: Tři Sestry (Three Sisters), Fabrika, Orlik, Šandy, Našrot, Do Řady! (To Order!) and the once-banned Plexis, whose original name, Plexis PM, Ryback points out (1990, p. 202), was an anagram of 'Sex Pistols' and 'Exploited'. Some of the reasons for punk continuing to thrive in Czechoslovakia are indicated by Simon Frith in his description of the group VZ in 1988:

the best, most driven punk band I've seen since 1977. Talking to the group afterward I found them to be in their late twenties, weary, wary men whose energy is eaten up keeping going.

In a country that has heavily policed 'protest' for a decade, a rock career has a different pace, a different determination than in Britain or the USA. (*Village Voice*, 17 January 1989, p. 77)

A few tracks on *Rebelie* stand out for their energy and intuition, above a general tendency towards Sex Pistols and John Lydon derivations and heavy metal riffs. Orlík produce a distinctively 'grungy', dirty guitar sound in three songs, which denounce skinheads, celebrate the Žižkov area of Prague and satirise Karel Gott, while Tři Sistry (an all-male band, despite their name) incorporate a piano accordion into the standard punk line-up of guitars and drums to produce the most idiosyncratically Czech sounds on the record – a local variant on what has become a global idiom.

Monitor released a companion compilation album to *Rebelie* entitled *Nové Horizonty* (New Horizons), which features five rock groups: Rio, Jižní Pól (South Pole), Bizarro, Čínská Čtvrť (Chinese Quarter) and Toyen. Čínská Čtvrť produce some distinctive power chords comparable to guitar bands like Sonic Youth or the Blue Aeroplanes, while most of the others show that the influence of Genesis-inspired synthesiser 'symphonic rock' is still prevalent in Czechoslovakia, together with heavy metal and the later Beatles. In this latter vein, Jižní Pól's song 'Hosté' (Guests) stands out, but the prevalent impression is of a technological and musical impasse in relatively dated forms of rock music. But there are signs of regeneration in the rock music scene in Prague, according to the disc jockey Ivan Cafourek, who plays music by the Smiths, Stone Roses, Depeche Mode and others on his weekly programme of independent rock on Radio Prague's Mikroforum FM:

At present there are about 150 (Czech and Slovak) bands with great energy and enthusiasm but none of them have really got it together. The problem is they cannot compete outside this country. There are a few exceptions like Ocean for example, who toured with Erasure last year, but all the smaller bands have an ongoing problem with the lack of equipment and sometimes lack of ideas. (Balogh 1990, p. 49)

Lack of up-to-date technology has become the most important problem inhibiting the development of Czech rock and pop music. Until groups have access to samplers, sequencers and other digital equipment taken for granted in western popular music production, they have little chance of getting a hearing on the world circuit, and interest in their music seems doomed to be confined to a political context. The current World Music boom in popular music is largely issuing from production studios in Paris and London, where state-of-the-art technology is used to treat and process music from Third World countries, and even, as in the case of the highly successful *Mystères des Voix Bulgares*, traditional eastern European musics; but rock groups outside the Anglo-American hegemony of popular music have generated little interest. House and dance music has become less parochial: Italian, Belgian, Swiss and German variations on what is a predominantly Anglo-American genre are generating an interest that is more than merely exotic, but rock music, which has enjoyed a regeneration since the late 1980s, is still dominated by English and American influences. Despite the vogue for 1960s psychedelia among young British pop groups associated with the Manchester sound, it is doubtful whether the Plastic People would have aroused much interest in the West were it not for the group's reputation as persecuted dissidents. It is only in the restricted subculture of avant-garde popular music that national barriers have little importance, as the Australian critic Philip Brophy has indicated: 'the problems of differentiating avant-garde rock along nationality lines lie in the way that this stream

of rock music connects with the broad historical references and sources more than with localised social and cultural environments' (Brophy 1987, p. 140).

However, the vital political function which rock music assumed in the Soviet bloc up to 1989 is something which can perhaps only be envied in the West. What Artemy Troitsky says of rock in the USSR is also true of Czechoslovakia and other eastern European countries:

the definitive Soviet rock bands were not about dance, entertainment, or artistic innovations, but about telling people the truth. Under Brezhnev, rock was the only truly informal and uncontrollable art form, and whereas dissident samizdat books and magazines were only accessible to tiny circles of intellectuals, rock songs, thanks to a gigantic underground taping industry, knew no boundaries. The social and political role of rock was nothing if not colossal: in those deceitful days, this was the only way for millions of kids to identify with the truth and to learn about State hypocrisy and corruption, and to find out about the alternative way of life. (Troitsky 1989, p. 6)

Now that this 'alternative way of life' has become a realisable possibility, it is likely that the political role of rock in eastern Europe will become less prominent. Indications that a shift away from political concerns has already taken place in Prague theatres, which functioned prior to 1989 as political meeting places for audiences attuned to allegorical readings of the most innocuous-seeming plays, are already evident. And the fact that Czechoslovakia now has MTV and Prague is on the international rock touring circuit may be cause for caution: a cover story in *New Musical Express* in December 1990 entitled 'Czech Pint Charlies' followed the drunken exploits of British rock band The Mission on tour in Prague. The group is portrayed as vomiting profusely on stage and elsewhere, expressing their general obliviousness about politics, and almost coming to blows with a Czech youth angered by their total lack of knowledge of Czech and Slovak history. The author of the article, Roger Morton, concludes: 'they discovered the meaning of a free Czechoslovakia. It means that now, like most anywhere in the world, if you're a moneyed rock'n'roller, you can act like a slobbering rock pig, and the waiters still smile at you' (*NME*, 8 December 1990, p. 26). Comfort may be drawn from the probability that, due to their limited commercial viability on the international popular music market, Czech rock groups are unlikely ever to be 'moneyed' on the scale of The Mission, a factor which may serve to prolong some of the positive effects of a localised underground status.

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