



Views from the Inside

Czech Underground
Literature
and Culture

(1948–1989)

Martin Machovec
(ed.)

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Manifestoes - Testimonies - Documents

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Ivan Martin Jirous
Report on the Third Czech
Musical Revival

In the great cultural revolutions there is only one way for the people – to free themselves by their own efforts. Nothing must be used that would do it for them. Believe in people, rely on them and respect their initiative. Cast away fear! Don't be afraid of commotion. Let people educate themselves in the great revolutionary movement.

MAO TSE-TUNG¹

(I)

At the end of 1974, a day before New Year's Eve, we went by train to a concert in Líšnice, a small village west of Prague. We got out at the nearest station and went the remaining few kilometres on foot, through the dusky, half-frozen muddy fields. There were about forty-five of us: we knew that another crowd of our friends were approaching Líšnice from the bus stop on the other side, and that many more were coming by car. Our mood was one of sheer joy. There was a tangible hope that we would be celebrating the end of the year with music: we were going to the first concert of a group called Umělá Hmota (Artificial Material),² and after that the Plastics and DG 307 were to play. As we walked through the bleak countryside, many of us experienced an intense feeling, which some expressed in words. It reminded us of the pilgrimages of the first Hussites into the mountains. When this was said, we made jokes along those lines and developed the theme. As soon as we came

1) The epigraph is taken from "Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution", 4, "Let the Masses Educate Themselves in the Movement." See *Peking Review* 9, no. 33 (1966): 6-11; online at <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1966/PR1966-33g.htm>.

The English translation in the *Peking Review* is a bit different: "*In the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the only method is for the masses to liberate themselves, and any method of doing things in their stead must not be used. Trust the masses, rely on them and respect their initiative. Cast out fear. Don't be afraid of disturbances. Chairman Mao has often told us that revolution cannot be so very refined, so gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. Let the masses educate themselves in this great revolutionary movement and learn to distinguish between right and wrong and between correct and incorrect ways of doing things.*"

2) Sometimes translated as Artificial Matter or Synthetic Material.

to Líšnice, we said, the lords – today the establishment – would be waiting to drive us away.

And that was what happened. In spite of the fact that the concert was sponsored by a group of local firemen (with whom the musicians often play football), in spite of the fact that local council had approved the event, we were told to disperse at once, or else force would be used. We dispersed, because today people who want to listen to the music they like (just like the people in the days of Hus who went to the hills to listen to words they wanted to hear) have no other recourse for the time being but to retreat from violence. As we were leaving the hall in the Líšnice restaurant, there was a party of hunters in the next room with a brass band that produced as many decibels as a rock group, and there they were celebrating the New Year under a decorated evergreen, that loving symbol of Christmas. One member of this group was the man who forbade others to enjoy themselves in the way they wanted. Arrogantly, he refused to speak to any of us and called the police. He was vice-chairman of the local council.

In the past, they would have called him a servant of the Anti-Christ; today, he is a representative of the establishment. He doesn't deserve the attention he is getting here. He is just one of the many nameless bureaucrats who, since the beginning of the seventies, have frustrated, banned or broken up many such musical gatherings. He is symptomatic of a time that turns its hatred and suspicion against people who desire nothing more than to create the type of art and environment that they must create, who stubbornly refuse to let their art be used in any other way than to speak to those who, with the artists, wish to live in truth.

(II)

I am not as interested in describing what these people do – for the music must be heard to be appreciated – as I am in explaining how and why they do it. I have called it the third Czech musical revival, a period that began in early 1970s, most probably about 1973.

It is not important when the first Czech musical revival took place (if there ever was one): our term comes from a statement once made by Karel Voják, a friend of the Primitives Group. He

referred to the late sixties as the “second musical revival”, a time when there was an unexpected boom in rock music (or Big Beat, as they called it then) – mainly in Prague, but elsewhere in Bohemia as well.

In Prague alone, there were several hundred rock groups. Few of them achieved public recognition, let alone fame. But that’s not the point. The most important thing was their sheer numbers. For the first time, people who would normally have no access to art – because of their social origins, their ignorance of what education is, or their unwillingness to continue in school, given the difficulty of getting a real education in the present school system – now had this opportunity. And regardless of quality, the profusion of these groups made natural selection possible. Bands formed, played, disbanded and regrouped into new ones. How else can people with similar opinions and natures get to know about each other except when they can display what they know in a relatively public forum?

I consider one of the greatest crimes of the present establishment to be the information blockade surrounding young people at that most important age – from 16 to 19 years of age – when their minds are taking definitive shape. I get furious when I hear people saying that anyone who really wants to achieve something can do it, regardless of the obstacles. Where are these young people and how can one find what they are looking for when they are being surrounded by an impenetrable wall of silence and misinformation? Josef Janíček, now the bandmaster of The Plastic People, played with group called The Swimmers for three years before joining The Primitives Group at the age of 19. Milan Hlavsa first performed with The Undertakers and two other short-lived bands that he had established, The New Electric Potatoes and Hlavsa’s Fiery Factory, before forming The Plastic People of the Universe in September 1968 at the age of 19. How can the people in Czechoslovakia today form bands with a decent chance for survival when there is no spontaneous musical milieu in which they can meet, compare notes, play together, or follow their own path while being guided by their own freely felt musical sense and, above all, by a feeling of kinship? But whatever the case, those times are gone forever. The main purpose of this brief excursion into the history of Czech rock music is to

make a comparison with the present state of things, which I will deal with shortly. I have deliberately not mentioned the names of any once-famous Czech rock bands; my point was rather to draw attention to the vast range of the music existing at that time. There was however one band in Prague that cannot be overlooked: The Primitives Group.

(III)

When the mode of the music changes

When the mode of the music changes

The walls of the city shake.

THE FUGS³

Now that some years have gone by, we can say without exaggeration that the appearance of The Primitives Group in Prague marked the arrival of a new phenomenon – underground music – even though it was emotionally and instinctively, rather than consciously understood. This is another reason why I have not mentioned other bands from the “golden” era of Czech rock: lamentably, they blew their opportunities and responsibilities. It was amazing to see how younger musicians far outdid their colleagues in older, degenerated forms of music, in terms of commercializing and marketing their music. How their sole aim became a career in small musical clubs and theatres and how they made great efforts to conventionalize their performances so that they could not be attacked by the weak-minded critics who judged rock music by dead standards that no longer applied to anything, not even to those fields of art from which they had originally been borrowed.

In this commercial sea of mental poverty into which one officially accepted band after another submerged itself, the Primitives Group could not be overlooked. It was a rough-hewn group, miles away from the artificial smoothness of other bands, and in fact was probably unconsciously trying for precisely this effect. It did not have its own repertoire but proved its sensitivity by playing music by Jimi Hendrix, Eric Burdon, The Grateful Dead, The Pretty Things, The

3) The song is from the Fugs album *It Crawled into my Hand, Honest* (1968).

Doors, The Mothers of Invention, and The Fugs. In the late sixties, the performance of English and American rock by Czech groups was absolutely essential in the local scene. At that time the market was far less flooded with foreign records than it is today. Back then, when The Primitives Group first played Zappa, he was familiar only to a handful of people.

But that alone would not have been enough to make The Primitives Group the legitimate fathers of the underground as a movement that has created, outside of a corrupt society, its own independent world with a different charge of inner energy, different aesthetic and, as a result, a different ethic. What made them unique was their emphasis on one stream of contemporary music which was at that time called *psychedelic sound*. In this respect The Primitives Group were quite original and creative, if only because at the time they knew little more about it than what the expression “psychedelic sound” meant; nevertheless, they captured its proper spirit. Through their music they tried to create in their listeners a particular mental state which, temporarily at least, liberated them and exposed the primary foundation of their being. They used other means besides music to achieve this - approaches borrowed from art and, above all, from happenings - in concerts like FISH FEAST (celebrating water), BIRD FEAST (air) and others using fire. In brief, as soon as the official critics of pop music began to pay attention to this *enfant terrible* of Czech rock, the group voluntarily disbanded. This did not mean the end of psychedelic music in Prague, however. When The Primitives Group split up in April 1969, The Plastic People of the Universe had already been playing together for five months.

(IV)

*The world is beautiful
But plastic people don't see it.
Flowers are beautiful
But plastic people don't see it.
The sunset is beautiful
But plastic people don't see it.
There is only one thing for their eyes
Only one thing is beautiful to them:
Plastic People in the Underground.*
THE UNIVERSE SYMPHONY

The Plastic People of the Universe took up the banner of the underground consciously but, just as The Primitives Group created their own version of psychedelic music out of lack of knowledge and information, the Plastics understood the term “underground” purely in terms of feeling, an essentially literal interpretation of the word. One important factor for the development of rock music in Prague was the fact that the founder of The Plastic People, Milan Hlavsa, was an excellent composer. Original music was combined with original texts which, in the first place (let’s call it the mythological phase of the Plastics) reflected a kind of cosmology of the underground. In this period, the underground was understood in mythological terms of the world as an alternative mentality different from the mentality of people living in the establishment. The lyrics of Michal Jernek and Věra Jirousová, full of echoes from the Cabbala of Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim (whose symbols were used by The Primitives Group in their celebrations of the elements), often presented attitudes of people of the underground that fully justified the addition “of the Universe” in the group’s name. In a song characteristic of that period, *The Sun*, the Plastics sang: “All the stupid brains are out in the sun; our powerful nation lives in a velvet underground”. In the composition *The Universe Symphony*, they celebrated the individual planets of the solar system; the section devoted to Earth was called *Plastic People Underground*. In *The Song of Two Unearthly Worlds*, about the mythic Fafejta Bird, there are references not only to Celtic mythology and the Agrippian Cabbala,

but also to the world of rock music (John Lennon and Yoko Ono) which, again, was presented through mythological interpretation. Even when the Plastics turned to the real world, as it might seem in the song *Fireball* – which celebrates one of their favourite figures in Czech history, Prokop Diviš, the eccentric inventor of the lighting rod – the facts of the story were so radically altered (Diviš is sitting in a cabin inside the Canadian woods with his friends, one of which is Roy Estrada, a former bass guitarist of The Mothers of Invention) that it was clear they were once again interpreting reality using mythical terms.

The Plastic People consciously continued a tradition established by The Primitives Group through their use of visual techniques to strengthen the impact of their music. Costumed attendants guarded fires burning on stage, the members of the band played with painted faces, and, in the composition of *Fireball*, there was a fire-eater performance. At the premiere of *The Universe Symphony* in the artists' club in Mánes in Prague, the Plastics killed a live chicken as a sacrifice to the god Mars. During the same evening (this was shortly after man had first landed on the Moon), they burned the model flying saucer that had always been an essential part of their stage decoration.

Along with their own work, the Plastic People continued the tradition of “enlightenment” established by The Primitives Group: they were the first group to present to Czech audience live performances of work by Warhol's group The Velvet Underground and the vast majority of songs by Ed Sanders and Tuli Kupferberg of The Fugs from New York. Of course, they also performed new works by Zappa.

That was roughly the situation at the time when the tag “of the Universe” was fully justified. The Plastics still bear their full name today, out of a fidelity to their original title. Nonetheless, things that have happened since then firmly anchored them to earth. The mythological underground has become a genuine sociological and cultural underground, in the sense proclaimed in the early sixties by Ed Sanders, Allen Ginsberg, Jeff Nuttall, Timothy Leary, and many other pioneers of this movement. I would even go so far as to say that, in relation to our establishment, it has become an underground in the true sense of the word.

(V)

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW, 4, 8-9

At the beginning of the 1970s, the establishment took drastic steps which, practically speaking, destroyed rock music as a movement. Groups were forbidden to have repertoires sung in English, bands with English names were forced to change them, and many top rock musicians deplorably became back-up musicians for the stars of commercial pop music. The Plastic People of the Universe decided to reject all the changes enforced on them by an alien will that did not flow naturally from the character and inner needs of the musicians. They kept their name, their repertoire and their appearance intact. The group lost its professional status; weaker individuals left and the core of the new Plastic People - around Hlavsa and Janíček - started off practically empty-handed with no equipment, only a few instruments and apparently nothing to fall back on but the absolutely clear concept that it is the musician's responsibility to play the kind of music that his conscience tells him to play and that gives him pleasure, for this is the only way that he can share his creative joy with his audience.

After a period of public inactivity during which the newly formed Plastic People were consolidated and joined by the excellent violinist Jiří Kabeš (Paul Wilson sang with them for some time), they began to perform at occasional dances. When playing in Ledeč nad Sázavou in the winter of 1971, it was already clear to people that it was an important rock group that proved one could survive without making compromises. Dozens of people came to Ledeč from Prague, Karlsbad and other cities. The mood that was later described as "going into the mountains" (as I mentioned in the introduction) began to take shape. When Milan Hlavsa saw all the people in Ledeč who hitch-hiked or travelled long distances by car, train or bus to hear the Plastic People performing, he made a memorable statement: "We couldn't just shit on these people, even if we wanted to. What kind of entertainment would they have left if we had done so?"

The Plastic People found themselves in the exceptional position of being the only underground rock group in Bohemia. Their whole existence showed that “underground” was not just an attractive label indicating a certain musical tendency, but that it presented, above all, an attitude towards life.

I have always felt angry towards other relatively decent rock groups who in the early 1970s were trying to make an official name for themselves and surrendered to the demands of the establishment in exchange for the right to play publicly music, **some kind of music**, thus making it impossible for themselves to be truly creative.

Why did these musicians do it? I think it was because they lacked, and they are still lacking, the awareness of what art is, what function it has in the world, and what responsibilities those who were awarded the gift of creativity should have. Anyone who is not absolutely clear about that in his own mind can easily fall off track. The Plastic People maintained their integrity not because they were good musicians - in other rock groups of the time, there were better musicians - yet during the most difficult period, when they were lacking equipment, had nothing to fall back on and no public prospects, one thing was clear to them: **It is better not to play at all than to play music that does not flow from one's own convictions. It is better not to play at all than to play what the establishment demands.** And even this statement appears too mild. It is not better; it is absolutely essential. This stand must be taken right at the beginning. For as soon as the first compromise is made, whether it is accompanied by hypocritical excuses or it springs from an honest belief that it doesn't really matter, everything is lost.

As soon as the devil (who today speaks through the mouth of the establishment) lays down the first condition: cut your hair, just a little, and you'll be able to play - you must say no. As soon as the devil (who today speaks through the mouth of the establishment) says - change your name and you'll be able to continue playing what you've been playing - you must say no, we will not play at all.

At the same time it is not even a real issue, for the establishment has no power to prevent from playing those who reject all the advantages that follow from being professional musicians. The establishment can only put pressure on those who want to be better off than the rest. For those who want to live a better life - not

in the sense of financial security, but in terms directed towards the following of the truth – the long arm of the establishment is too short. Only those artists who understand that they were awarded with the gift of art with the help of which they may speak to those close to them and will not use it to become better off than the rest deserve to be called artists. “The great artist of tomorrow will go underground”, wrote Marcel Duchamp at the end of his life.⁴ He didn’t use the word “underground” to indicate some new trend. He meant the underground as a new mental attitude of an honest artist who reacts against the dehumanization and prostitution of values in the consumer society.

(VI)

The claim that the Plastic People became the only genuinely underground rock group in Czechoslovakia does not indicate that they were the only underground music group to exist. A band called Aktual performed alongside the Plastic People for a short time. Although it could be loosely defined as a rock band, its leader and composer, Milan Knížák, employed techniques of aleatoric music and serial composition (and while doing so he declared his affinity with the new music represented above all by John Cage). Knížák, who was primarily involved with happenings, environments and

4) See Paul Bennett, “Marcel Duchamp, un art de vivre”, from LE DEVOIR.com (<<http://www.ledevoir.com/2007/07/14/150252.html>>): “Duchamp fustigera jusqu’à la fin de sa vie l’ego des artistes et la compétition dans le domaine de l’art. Pour lui, l’artiste véritable ne peut que se réfugier dans la clandestinité, aller sous terre pour échapper à la frénésie de l’art commercialisé. Il fut un des premiers, sinon le premier, à utiliser le terme d’»underground«: »The great artist of tomorrow will go underground«, déclara-t-ill à la occasion d’un colloque organisé en 1961 par le Musée de Philadelphie, qui avait hérité de la collection la plus complète de ses oeuvres /.../.”

See also Jean Neyens 1965 interview with Duchamp: (<<http://toutfait.com/duchamp.jsp?postid=1440&keyword=>>): “Une table ronde qu’on avait faite à Philadelphie, on m’avait demandé »Ou allons-nous?« Moi j’ai simplement dit: »Le grand bonhomme de demain se cachera. Ira sous terre.« En anglais c’est mieux qu’en français - »Will go underground«. Il faudra qu’il meure avant d’être connu. Moi, c’est mon avis, s’il y a un bonhomme important d’ici un siècle ou deux - eh bien! Il se sera caché toute sa vie pour échapper à l’emprise du marché... complètement mercantile, si j’ose dire.” (Duchamp refers here to the year 1961.)

events was somewhat ahead of his time when establishing this band. Unlike the Plastic People, he did not have a wide public ready to accept his music. (In this respect, the slow process of educating an audience to accept new musical forms – which had been going on since the era of the Primitives Group – proved its legacy). It resulted in a strange paradox: in October 1971, when Aktual and the Plastic People performed together in Suchá, a few hundred young people listened to the Plastics with enthusiasm (at that time their repertoire consisted almost entirely of songs of the Velvet Underground, along with several of their own compositions), but Aktual flopped. The only ones who liked Knížák's music were the Plastic People themselves and their immediate circle.

They were delighted by the energy, liveliness and variety of Aktual's performance in which the members of the band used empty tar-barrels, motorcycle, electric drills, axes, chopping blocks, rice, etc. What impressed them the most, however, were Knížák's lyrics⁵ in Czech which communicated provocative ideas directly to an audience which had so far been used to hearing songs in English (the lingua franca of rock). It is true, of course, that from the very beginning the Plastic People had some Czech songs in their repertoire but they were all performed as recitatives that had a tendency to intensify the bizarre and manneristic side of the Plastics' performances, rather than addressing people directly. Knížák, on the other hand, was firmly convinced – at a time when the notion was still far from popular – that contemporary music ought to speak to people in the language they understand.

Precisely because I value very highly Knížák's influence on the evolution of Plastic People – it was not a direct influence, but rather an impulse that came from the revealing comparison Aktual offered – I must mention an inherent weakness that we observed in Knížák's group and which later clearly led to its collapse. It has to do with the contradictions in Knížák's personality. Though he has always proclaimed that art should be almost an anonymous activity (in his case he and his collaborators were concealed behind the

5) Some of Milan Knížák's lyrics written for the band Aktual, both in Czech original and in English translation, were published in a booklet added to the CD *Aktual: děti bolševizmu / Kids of Bolshevism*, Guerrilla Records, 2005).