

From Folklore to Hard Rock

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Folk music is the primary and most original source for contemporary popular music in the Czech Republic. Czech folk music is rich in melodies—rhythmic dance elements play a lesser role, except in the hilly eastern regions adjoining the border with Slovakia—and we hear them as the inspiration for or as direct quotations in classical compositions by Bedřich Smetana, Antonín Dvořák (*Slavonic Dances*) and Leoš Janáček (*Lachian Dances*). They form an even larger part of the traditional Czech brass band repertoire. When rock-and-roll finally came to the former Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, “guitar groups” (they were not permitted to call themselves rock-and-roll groups, and their public performances were restricted) created arrangements with a few bars of melody from folk songs as a theme over a rock rhythm foundation. Vocal groups, such as the late 1960s group *Buccaneers* from Ostrava, did likewise. It must be said, though, that the public response toward these experiments was lukewarm.

From the beginning of the Communist regime in 1948, folk music became a sort of state music, propagated everywhere. It was supposed to serve as a barrier against what was called Western quasi-culture, in which category the Communist cultural ideologues included practically all American modern music (except, perhaps, for the older jazz of Louis Armstrong), clothing, hairstyles, and foods. However ridiculous it may seem today, for at least 20 years even Coca-Cola was condemned in former Czechoslovakia as a symbol of American imperialism. In its authentic version, but more frequently interpreted by stylized and complexly choreographed state ensembles, folk songs over the radio, on state

television (no other existed), and from the stages of large halls flooded audiences, especially in the 1950s. Of course, these were only “ideologically correct” songs. Texts with religious themes did not pass the censor; at Christmas, for in-

stance, no carols on the birth of Christ were broadcast. The Communist ideologues were trying to create a joyful picture of the life of the Czech people and their future, captured perfectly in the title of a feature film of the time, full of Moravian folk songs: *Tomorrow There'll be Dancing Everywhere*.

In this way the majority of young people soon were put off by Czech folk music. They were simply saturated with it. When the American folk singer Pete Seeger came to Prague in 1963 to give a concert, he was surprised by two things: how many young musical groups knew American folk songs, and how completely uninterested these groups were in their own Czech folklore. (Whereas the Communist ideology condemned American rock-and-roll, it favored American folk songs, especially when they could — as in the case of Negro spirituals — offer “proof” of the social injustices in American society.) This attitude toward folk music very slowly began to change, in part because of Seeger's influence. The performance of Czech folk songs by acoustic rock groups who called themselves folk or guitar groups was livelier than the state ensemble fare, less tradition bound and static.

In the early 1970s rock-and-roll and folk



Photo courtesy Hradišťan

The Hradišťan Dulcimer Band combines tradition and innovation – performing southern Moravian folk music and improvising with jazz, classical, and urban folk musicians. Founded 44 years ago in the ancient town of Uherské Hradiště (in the lowland wine region), the band combines historical values and customs with contemporary influences.



Photo by Zdeněk Uhrek

Contemporary folklore in the Czech Republic includes stylized revivals of older traditions often learned in a formal setting, as well as grassroots expressions passed on through family and village life. Although villagers in the Moravian region wear their traditional folk dress only on special occasions, members of the Radhošť ensemble always perform in costume.

songs truly began to mix, due mainly to the inspiration of two British folk-rock groups, Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span. The great popularity of the British group Jethro Tull then brought the "harder," more electric form of folk-rock to the Czech Lands. Under the folkloric conception of their melodies and Ian Anderson's flute came the rumble of the bass-guitar, the percussion instruments, and the electric guitar. The Czech groups Marsyas, AG Flek, Etc, and others, most of which not only still exist but continue to evolve and improve, founded a relatively broad stream of Czech folk-rock in which the Czech elements gradually outweighed the once-prevalent Anglo-Saxon ones.

Economics also played a part in the growing popularity of diverse forms of folk music: the most modern electric guitars, amplifiers, and keyboard instruments were so expensive for the musicians, most of them semi-amateurs, that they preferred music suited to simpler instruments. One of the reasons that Supraphon and Panton, the two state record companies at that time, only rarely issued records of this music was its relatively poor technical quality compared to the official pop music. On the other hand, the remove from the centers of the record industry, radio, and television helped the whole range of folk and folk-rock music to preserve a certain pristine quality. People who liked this type of music could usually only hear it live, in clubs and at larger outdoor concerts. It was further disseminated through amateur tape-recordings. Any television performances that might have occurred would have presented this music only in its most highly groomed, least provocative textual and musical form.

For visitors from the West who sought out this underground music scene because of its

relative freedom, the combination of various national and supranational elements was interesting. Prague itself, the chief city of Bohemia, had been marked for eight centuries by the intermingling of three influences: Czech, German, and Jewish. Even though this mix was not as apparent in the folk sphere as, for instance, in literature (Franz Kafka wrote here), it was also reflected in the music of some Czech folk singers (Vladimír Merta, Vlastimil Třešňák) or groups (Mišpacha).

A kind of typically Bohemian lack of primitive nationalism and an opposite inclination toward the supranational values of truth, intelligence, and professionalism, along with a sense of humor, took many folk and rock musicians onto the balconies during the "Velvet Revolution" in November 1989. Along with Czech songs, the hymns of the revolution included American songs with Czech texts, Seeger's "We Shall Overcome," and the gospel song "Little More Faith in Jesus," in which the group Spiritual Quintet led three-quarters of a million demonstrators. It is certainly no coincidence that the organizers of the festival of folk and rock music in Lipnice in 1988 provided the dissident and later president, Václav Havel — also an enthusiastic supporter of rock music and folk singers — his first opportunity to appear before the public (to the gnashing of the state security forces' teeth).

The most successful Czech musician abroad, the Prague composer, arranger, and virtuoso synthesizer player Jan Hammer, now a U.S. citizen, intervened in a marginal but very interesting way in the fusion of popular and national folk music. After leaving the jazz-rock group Mahavishnu Orchestra, Hammer and the American violinist Jerry Goodman recorded the album *Like Children* (1974); it included the composition "Country and Eastern Music," where Hammer uses melodic themes from Moravian Slovakia, the easternmost region of the Czech Republic, in the spirit of Leoš Janáček. Hammer moved from this folkloric phase toward the large-format television serials of the "Miami Vice" type. However, 20 years later the composer and pianist Emil Viklický linked jazz to folk songs

in a different and more penetrating manner in the album *Rain is Falling Down* (*Prší dešť*, 1994), where his combo plays together with traditional Moravian folk musicians — band leader and singer Jiří Pavlica, and harpsichord player and singer Zuzana Lapčiková.

This same Jiří Pavlica, who mostly performs traditional folk music from the Moravian region of Dolníácko with his own band Hradištan, also participated in the album *Vlasta Redl AG Flek + Jiří Pavlica Hradištan* (1994). About half the album consists of folk songs from Moravia. Rather than using the most popular melodies, the album features many songs that are not generally known, unusual in their melody and harmony, and thus especially exciting to the average listener. Some of the arrangements simultaneously approach hard rock, through Redl's way of singing and even more so through the sharp, metallic sound of the solo guitar. The nomination of this album for several prestigious prizes for 1994 bears out its wide popularity. The Fleret and Dobrohošť groups, both employing Moravian folk music, are also examples of bands using this hard rock and folk style, although in a significantly simpler form.

In addition to the main current of folk-rock groups, the folk repertoire is alive in various other branches of pop and rock music, for example in solo performance and duets. Two women singers and instrumentalists are a true phenomenon, and they have captured the interest of connoisseurs in smaller clubs in France, Japan, and elsewhere: the violinist Iva Bittová, whose father is Romany, and the guitar player Dagmar Andrtová. Their performances are unique and not for every taste; artistically, however, they have taken the influence of folklore farther than anyone else.

It seems that the rock link with folklore — not always with Czech folklore — has found most acceptability with the broadest public in the groups, active for several years now, playing so-called Celtic rock. Their inspiration is the harp and bagpipe player, all-round instrumentalist, and singer from Brittany, Alan Stivell, who presented several concerts in the

Czech Lands. Members of groups like the Czech Heart (*České srdce*) have played on his records. The appeal of Celtic rock stems not only from the strongly melodious Irish, Scottish, Welsh, and Breton songs, but also perhaps from a certain historical and romanticized kinship Czechs feel with the Celtic tribes which had settled in Bohemia in ancient times. Outstanding among these "Czech Celts" is the violinist and composer Jan Hrubý (his third album is *The Burning Rose*, 1994) of the group Kukulín. With his eccentric virtuosity and melodic imagination — again with strong Moravian elements — he goes beyond all Stivell or other Celtic sources.

"Czech Celts" appear from time to time in various parts of the Czech Republic, but they probably originated in Prague, where the paths of talented musicians often lead and where they more often become prophets with their innovations than "at home" in regions with an ingrained and often strictly observed interpretation of folk music.

The Romanies are a smaller, narrow, and quite independent chapter in this development of folk music and rock. They mostly play either one or the other, rarely both together. The group called Točkolotoč from the Bohemian-Moravian border did perform typical hard rock in public for the first time under the name Version 5. However, over time, under the influence of Czech folk groups in their town of Svitavy, they returned to their family music traditions and incorporated them into new songs of their own, in a sort of folk-rock format, with the gradual replacement of the acoustic contrabass by the electric bass-guitar and with emphasis on the solo guitar played in a style taken from the dulcimer.

Generally speaking, the more emphasis there is on folk elements in the music described in this article, the greater is its popularity and the wider its performers' acclaim with listeners.

No one knows what precise blend of folk and rock music would be most successful, but should anyone resolve this challenge, he/she will be producing the music, not writing about it.

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