

The Plastic People of the Universe

by Joseph Yanosik (March 1996)

The Plastic People of the Universe was the name of perhaps the greatest obscure rock band of all time and their incredible story ranks as one of the truest examples of artistic perseverance and art imitating life in the entire history of Rock and Roll. Formed in 1968 following the Soviet invasion of their beloved Czechoslovakia, the Plastic People of the Universe suffered immeasurably for their simple desire to make their own music.

The story begins, of course, with the Beatles and 1964. It is imperative to understand that Beatlemania was not an isolated event limited to America and the United Kingdom. Young people throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union had their lives changed by John Lennon and the Beatles. Since the beginning of the Cold War, kids from the eastern side of the Iron Curtain had hungered for all things American as an escape from their cultural isolation. American jazz had served this purpose in the late 1940's through the fifties. The gates were then kicked open by Elvis and Bill Haley, but it was the Beatles who brought down the wall.

The early to mid-sixties were undoubtedly an exciting time in Czechoslovakia. Jazz, both American and Czechoslovak, was enjoying a comeback after years underground. The Nazi party had abolished jazz upon its occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1938. Since 1945, however, the new Communist party had been more tolerant of jazz, specifically the classic Czechoslovak jazz. And now, boring, predictable socialist life under Communist rule was suddenly injected with a jolt of democracy in its purest form: rock and roll! Thousands of "garage" bands were born in Czechoslovakia in the mid-sixties; hundreds in Prague alone. The kids went nuts in response to the Beatles, and the Big Beat, or "bigbit" as the Czechs called it, era began.

It was the height of the Big Beat era when American hipster poet Allen Ginsberg made his celebrated visit to Czechoslovakia. After accepting an invitation by students at Prague's Charles University, Ginsberg arrived in Prague in March of 1965 and gave several poetry readings in small theaters in Prague and Bratislava. The young people embraced the long-haired revolutionary and crowned him King of their May Day Festival. Antonin Novotny's hard-line Communist government, who Ginsberg had publicly denounced and insulted, appreciated Ginsberg less. After arresting him for alleged drug abuse and public drunkenness, the Secret Police broke into his hotel room and confiscated his writings, which they found to be lewd and morally dangerous. The government used these writings as an excuse to expel Ginsberg from the country on May 7, 1965.

The influence of Ginsberg's visit on Czech culture should not be underestimated. Suddenly, the streets of Prague were filled with long-haired hippies wearing blue

jeans and staging "happenings". The Communist way of life began to seem more and more foreign to a new generation of Czechoslovaks. An underground club scene formed and grew with each passing year, spawning hundreds of new bands. Among the best of the early Czech rock bands were Olympic, Czechoslovakia's premier Beatles band and the Primitives, Prague's first psychedelic band. The proliferation of rock and roll music into the culture increased as Czech radio stations switched to western pop programming, rock magazines sprung up, and Czech schools began teaching western rock and roll in the classrooms.

Novotny reacted to this influx of Western culture with a vengeance. He rid his cabinet of any party member with the slightest ideas of reform, and increased censorship laws. Prague officials felt Novotny had overreacted and replaced him with an experienced party leader who they believed would lead Czechoslovakia through necessary reforms without upsetting the Kremlin. On January 5, 1968, Alexander Dubcek replaced Novotny as the leader of the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia. It was the beginning of the Prague Spring.

Dubcek soon initiated a string of reforms that brought Czechoslovakia closer to Western style ideals than at any time before. By April 1968, Dubcek had purged government positions of all hard-line Communists and announced a program of "socialist democracy" for the country. He also lifted all censorship in the radio, press and television and cleared all prisons of artists and other political prisoners of the former regime. Prague Spring resembled nothing less than San Francisco 1967. Hippies and drugs were everywhere, and rock music flourished in the clubs and the streets. It was a special time while it lasted, but the Kremlin felt Dubcek had gone too far.

Early in the morning of August 21, 1968, Soviet tanks and 175,000 Warsaw Pact troops began a massive invasion of Czechoslovakia in order to crush the Prague Spring. Passive resistance, for the most part, was practiced by the Czech defenders but some blood was shed. Many street signs were mixed up by the hippies to confound the oncoming tanks. Three days later, it was all over. The tanks and the troops remained and the citizens resumed their lives. Protests did continue; the most sensational being the suicide of Jan Palach, a philosophy student in Prague, who doused himself in kerosene and set himself on fire in the center of Wenceslas Square.

The Plastic People of the Universe were formed by bassist Milan Hlavsa less than a month after the invasion. Initially inspired by the Velvet Underground, the group also covered songs from other American groups such as the Fugs, the Doors, Captain Beefheart and Frank Zappa's Mothers of Invention. The name of the band was taken from Zappa's song entitled "Plastic People". Their artistic director/manager was a brilliant art historian and cultural theoretician named Ivan Jirous. Jirous was previously the artistic director of the Primitives, and when he joined the Plastics in 1969, he brought with him the lead guitarist of the Primitives, Josef Janicek. The addition of viola player Jiri Kabes further likened their sound to

the Velvet Underground. Their concert performances were more like "happenings" featuring set pieces, outlandish makeup and costumes, and psychedelic light shows.

Following the 1968 invasion, the Kremlin initiated a "normalization" program to reestablish moral and social behavior befitting a Communist country. The government began closing down many of Prague's leading rock clubs and censoring the news and film industries, yet still the rock scene continued to flourish amidst the political turmoil. The Beach Boys played an historic concert at Lucerna Hall in Prague in May of 1969 and dedicated their song "Breaking Away" to recently replaced Prague Spring reformer Dubcek who sat in the audience.

As the "normalization" continued, some bands, like Olympic, changed their sound and look and survived the transition. The Plastic People, however, refused to change. The Plastics remained Prague's leading psychedelic band until January 1970 when their nonconformity led to the government revoking their professional license. In addition to no longer being allowed to receive money for their performances, the demotion to amateur status also meant the loss of state-owned instruments and access to rehearsal space.

The Plastics continued to perform as an amateur band but vowed to seek reinstatement of professional status. The band scrounged up used instruments and Janicek, an auto mechanic by trade, constructed crude amplifiers from old transistor radios. It was at this time that Paul Wilson, a Canadian grad student from Oxford who had come to Prague in 1967 for a semester in order to study practical Communism but had stayed on as an English teacher, met Ivan Jirous. Wilson was recruited by Jirous to teach the band English lyrics to songs by the Velvets, Fugs, Zappa and other western rock artists, and eventually befriended the entire band and joined the Plastics as lead singer. As an art critic, Jirous was a member of the Union of Artists, and could therefore obtain permits for convention halls. He would lecture on Andy Warhol for a few minutes, show a few slides, and then the Plastic People would "demonstrate" the songs of the Velvet Underground for a couple of hours. Eventually, the government caught on and these shows were cancelled.

In June of 1972, a concert in downtown Prague featuring the Plastic People was cancelled after drunken militia began scuffling with fans. The Plastics were banned from playing in Prague and retreated into the countryside. Paul Wilson left the band after singing with them during 1970 through 1972, during which time he estimates they played about 15 times in public.

Free jazz saxophonist Vratislav Brabenec, a generation older than most of the Plastics, was then introduced to the group by Jirous and immediately accepted as a Plastic Person. Brabenec, the most accomplished musician of them all, joined on the condition that they only play their own original material and sing in Czech from then on. The band agreed. At this time, the group reapplied for professional status. They were granted a temporary license but it was revoked two weeks later. Authorities claimed their music was "morbid" and would have a "negative social

impact", and they were totally banned from playing for the public. The Plastics refused to change to suit the establishment and retired into the underground.

At this time, their music, written primarily by Milan Hlavsa, became wildly original, darker and more atmospheric, especially featuring the brilliant sax playing by Brabenec. An entire underground movement grew around the Plastic People, including other bands, singers, poets and artists. This underground culture thrived in small Bohemian villages outside of the government's control.

Through the rest of the decade, the band found it increasingly difficult to perform their music without retribution. Whenever their friends had marriages, a wedding party provided an occasion to rent a hall and put on a private concert. Usually, however, putting together a concert was more akin to a cloak and dagger movie. A remote site in the woods near an isolated Bohemian village was picked, word of the location was then passed among friends, whispered from ear to ear. The exact location of the site was never revealed more than one day in advance and sometimes not revealed until that night. Fans would get off at the nearest rail station, then walk miles through the forest and across farms, sometimes for hours in rain or snow, searching for a remote farmhouse or barn. Often, the police would show up all the same and stop the show.

One of the most infamous of these encounters became known as the "Ceske Budovice Massacre". In March 1974, over a thousand fans showed up in the small town of Budovice to hear the Plastics perform, only to find the police waiting. Hundreds of fans were led through a dark tunnel to the rail station while being beaten with clubs, then herded onto a waiting train and sent back to Prague. Names were taken; six students were arrested and dozens were expelled from school. The Plastics never performed.

In response to the Budovice massacre, Ivan Jirous organized the First Music Festival of the Second Culture. Jirous was nicknamed "Magor", as in phantasmagoria, which roughly translates as "crazy", because of his ideas of creating a "Second Culture" totally separate from the totalitarian First Culture. This festival, dubbed "Hannibal's Wedding", took place in the village of Postupice near Benesov on September 1, 1974. Hundreds of fans gathered to hear the Plastics and other underground bands perform. By this time, Magor had convinced the band that rock and roll was the salvation for the Second Culture and that what they were doing was historically significant and extremely important.

The Plastics held a Second Music Festival of the Second Culture, also known as "Magor's Wedding", in the small town of Bojanovice on February 21, 1976. In response to this festival, on March 17, 1976, the Secret Police arrested 27 musicians and their friends including all the Plastic People. In addition, over 100 fans were interrogated. The band's homemade equipment was seized, their homes were searched and tapes, films and notebooks were confiscated. Paul Wilson was expelled from the country soon after and returned to Canada.

Six months later, the trial of the Plastic People and the other arrested artists began. The majority of the Plastic People were released due to international protests. However, four musicians including Vratislav Brabenec and Ivan Jirous from the Plastics, as well as Pavel Zajicek from the Plastics' sister band DG 307, and singer Svatopluk Karasek, were held for disturbing the peace.

On that day, September 21, 1976, as the four defendants sat handcuffed in the dock, rock and roll went on trial. It was the hippies versus the Communist state. The prosecutors cited vulgar lyrics in some songs and described their music as an "anti-social phenomenon" that was corrupting the Czech youth. The defendants responded with dignity, defending their right to write and sing the songs they wanted. Two days later, all four were found guilty of "organized disturbance of the peace". Jirous was sentenced to 18 months, Zajicek to 12 months, and both Karasek and Brabenec to 8 months in Prague's Ruzne Prison.

A diverse group of supporters, including playwrights, writers, professors and other Czech intellectuals, had attended the trial and gathered outside in the hallway. Among the supporters was avant-garde playwright Vaclav Havel who had met Jirous a week earlier and had been impressed with the man and his philosophy. Havel left the trial feeling disgusted with the world and resolved to make a difference.

In the months that followed, these sympathizers gathered in solidarity with the hippies and rallied around the Plastic People. They dared to establish a human rights organization and released a statement of principles on January 1, 1977, naming their organization after the charter, Charter 77. Havel said that the Plastics were defending "life's intrinsic desire to express itself freely, in its own authentic and sovereign way", which is as close to a perfect definition of both democracy and rock and roll as has ever been stated. Charter 77 evolved into a world-famous human rights petition that eventually landed Havel in jail, and was a precursor to the national revolution that occurred 12 years later.

Since the late 1970's, the Plastics had begun recording their music on tapes and circulating them among friends and fans. A number of these tapes, smuggled out of the country, were eventually released as records in the west. Their first and best album was "Egon Bondy's Happy Hearts Club Banned", recorded in a Bohemian castle in 1973-74, and smuggled to the west and released as an album in 1978 without the band's knowledge. It is one of the most original albums of all time with its fusion of psychedelic jazz rock, classical European melodic structures and the comedic lyrics of Czech poet Egon Bondy.

The band continued recording and releasing music clandestinely throughout the '70s into the '80s with the help of Paul Wilson in Toronto and others. Following Brabenec's release, Havel allowed the Plastic People the use of his country home in Hradecek for the Third Music Festival of the Second Culture on October 1, 1977. The police did not break up the concert but circled the property and remained an

imposing presence as the Plastics performed in the barn. A tape of this concert was released in the west in 1979 as "Hundred Points". The band recorded their next album "Passion Play", about the crucifixion of Christ, also at Havel's farm in 1980 while the police again staked out the surrounding woods.

In April 1981, the Plastics performed their next album "Leading Horses" at a friend's house near Ceska Lipa. A few weeks later, the house was mysteriously burned to the ground. When Vratislav Brabenec was later picked up for interrogation by the secret police, the police all but admitted to torching the house. Shortly thereafter in 1981, the Plastics recorded "Leading Horses" again at Vaclav Havel's farm, which had become their only safe haven. By 1982, Brabenec was finally forced into exile after being picked up regularly by the secret police and interrogated or beaten for hours at a time. He relocated to the suburb of Scarborough in Toronto, Canada, which has a Czech community of over 10,000. He is a landscape gardener.

In 1983, "Leading Horses" was released by Bozi Myln records, the address of which happens to be Paul Wilson's house in Toronto Canada. Another album, entitled "Slaughterhouse", was recorded in 1984 but remains unreleased at this time. The Plastics recorded their last album entitled "Midnight Mouse" in 1986. It was a more pop-sounding record, yet still retained the Plastics spirit.

The '80's had brought a new sound to Czechoslovakia: punk rock. The appearance of this new music on the scene almost made the Communists wish the kids were listening to the Beatles again. Leather-clad teenagers with spiky, tri-colored hair and bad attitudes gave the Communist officials new problems to worry about and mainstream rock began to seem like the lesser of two Devils. Punks were especially subject to unprovoked beatings by the police at this time.

In June 1986, Czechoslovakia hosted its first national rock festival, Rockfest 86. Many previously banned groups were allowed to perform and it appeared that the rock scene was beginning to show signs of liberalization. Late in 1987, hints were being dropped by Czech officials that if the group changed their name from the Plastic People, they would be granted a license. In April 1988, the Plastic People of the Universe broke up over disagreements on the issue of changing the name. Jan Brabec, the drummer, maintained that he would play as the Plastic People or not at all, and quit.

Hlavsa then formed a new band, Pulnoc, meaning "midnight". Hlavsa chose Pulnoc as the name for the band because it reflected not an end but a transformation of the Plastic People. "Midnight is a very special time", Hlavsa explained. "It is when one day dies and another is born. And yet there is continuity. That is how it is with this band." Along with the core of the Plastic People (Hlavsa, Kabes, Janicek), the new band featured a younger generation of musicians, including Hlavsa's sister-in-law, Michaela Nemcova, an operatically-trained singer and music teacher, Karel Jancak, a 23-year-old guitarist who had played in a Prague punk band, cellist Tomas

Schilla, and drummer Petr Kuzamandas. Pulnoc was allowed to play abroad only because they travelled as 'tourists.' Pulnoc made its first official appearance at the Junior Klub in Prague in the spring of 1988.

Around this time, Magor was sentenced to 16 months in prison for reading protest poems in public. To call his attention to his friend's situation, Vratislav Brabenec made a rare appearance and performed in New York City in January 1989 with Allen Ginsberg and Ed Sanders of the Fugs in a benefit for Magor, who had at this time now spent 8 of his last 15 years in prison. Old films of the Plastic People performing in Czechoslovakia were shown.

In April of 1989, with lead singer Nemcova pregnant with twins, Pulnoc began a 7 city national tour of the United States. The band dedicated each performance on this tour to Magor. They performed new songs as well as Plastic People songs, marking the first time in nearly 20 years that they were able to perform Plastic People music in public without fear of arrest. Their historic shows at Performance Space 122 in Manhattan brought out the press, including an MTV film crew, and practically the entire Czech community in New York City. The audience gave the band a thundering ovation before they even began to play. Pavel Zajicek, now a sculptor living in NYC, reunited with his friends to sing lead vocals on a song based on a William Blake poem. The music they made during these shows glowed with the spirit of freedom and mirrored the soon-to-be death of communism on a global basis.

Back in Eastern Europe, things were happening fast. Communism was falling all around as revolutions and massive protests overwhelmed the Stalinist governments. In November 1989, the Berlin Wall came down. On Nov. 17, 1989, Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution began as more and more students showed up every day in Wenceslas Square to protest police brutality. They were soon joined by playwrights, actors, musicians including the entire Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, and other Czech citizens, until they were 300,000 strong. The revolution ended successfully 24 days later.

Magor was released from prison on December 2, 1989 and immediately got involved with the new young punk scene. On December 14, 1989, the Czech Philharmonic gave a concert at Smetana Hall in Prague, which became the most famous concert in the history of that country. Everyone there was delirious with happiness, knowing the overthrow of communism was almost completed. Vaclav Havel was not yet President but as the leader of the pro-democracy Civic Forum, everyone knew he ought to be. Conductor Vaclav Neumann wore a large Civic Forum pin on his lapel. When Havel came on stage, the entire concert hall erupted into applause.

Three days before the end of the decade, on December 29, 1989, Vaclav Havel became President of Czechoslovakia and began replacing the Communist officials in his office with his friends including other Czech dissidents and rock musicians.

In January of 1990, just as the new democracy had begun, Frank Zappa flew to Prague at the invitation of Havel, one of his greatest fans. 5000 rock fans were waiting at the airport to witness the historic arrival of the famous American. A Prague film crew captured Zappa's arrival at the airport just as Shirley Temple Black, the former "good ship lollipop" girl, then the acting ambassador to Czech , was leaving. Mrs. Black was asked about her views on the distinguished Frank Zappa's visit. Czech citizens did not understand her horrified reaction to this question. Zappa met Havel at Prague Castle and presented the new president with several ideas on how to help Czechoslovakia move into the democratic age, such as cellular phones and tourism. Zappa was emotionally overcome upon meeting older fans of his who had endured beatings by the Secret Police for the sake of his music.

Another historic meeting was that between Havel and Velvet Underground founder Lou Reed, who had traveled to Prague in 1990 to interview Havel. In Prague Castle, Reed presented Havel with a copy of his latest album as Havel unfolded the incredible story of the Plastic People to an awed Lou Reed, explaining how influential the Velvet Underground and rock music had been in the Velvet Revolution. Later that night, Reed was taken to a club where a band was playing. As Reed recalled, "I suddenly realized the music sounded familiar. They were playing Velvet Underground songs ,, beautiful, heartfelt, impeccable versions of my songs. To say I was moved would be an understatement." The band was Pulnoc. Reed joined them on stage as they performed for Havel and 300 of his friends. After the concert, an ecstatic Havel introduced Reed to his friends, most of them former dissidents, as they recalled reciting Reed's lyrics in prison for comfort and inspiration.

Pulnoc recorded and released their self-titled debut album in Czechoslovakia in 1990. On June 15, 1990, when the original Velvet Underground reunited for the first time in 20 years in Paris for the opening of an Andy Warhol exhibition by the Cartier Foundation, Pulnoc opened for them. The band recorded and released a second album, "City of Hysteria" (featuring liner notes by Vaclav Havel and a new song by Egon Bondy), in the United States in 1991. A year later, Milan Hlavsa published a book in Czechoslovakia telling the story of the Plastics entitled "Bez Ohnu Je Underground", which coincided with the release of a multi-album box set of the complete recordings of the Plastic People.

The story of the Plastic People of the Universe came full circle on June 12, 1993, when they performed at Prague's Junior Klub to celebrate the impending arrival of the recently reunited Velvet Underground in Czechoslovakia. The Plastics appeared under the name of Meyla's Velvet Revival Band and played nothing but the classic songs of their original idols. The next day, the Velvet Underground performed to a sell-out crowd at the Palace of Culture in Prague, a feat which would have been unthinkable if not for the Plastic People of the Universe.

The amazing history of the Plastic People is so crucially intertwined with the history of Czechoslovakia that one can not fully understand the history of that

country without knowing the history of the band, and vice versa. No other rock band has had to put up with the abuse and the obstacles that the Plastics did during their lifetime. Yet they did not plan to risk their lives for their music. As Hlavsa said, they were "dissidents against their will." Eventually, however, they came to the realization that what they were doing was historically important and their very existence through the hard times their country was experiencing was a powerful symbol of freedom to the younger generation of Czechs.

The Plastic People were ultimately a major catalyst to the overthrow of communism in Eastern Europe. History would most surely have been very different without them. Apart from the aforementioned Beatles and the Velvet Underground, there's not a lot of rock and roll bands you can say that about.

Also, knowing that the true cultural heritage of Czechoslovakia includes not just Jan Hus and Franz Kafka but also Lou Reed and Frank Zappa makes it easier to understand why Vaclav Havel's record collection includes not just Antonin Dvorak but also "White Light White Heat" and "Bongo Fury." Let's face it. There's not a lot of national presidents you can say that about.

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