

ROCK



Angry Czech rockers go to prison

By Theo Blomquist

Western underground culture never really dies, it just passes on...and up.

Rock music, for example, was once considered a commie plot to undermine the national morals and social structure. In fact, rock has been and can be subversive. But today rock is a multi-billion dollar industry whose products are Peter Dinklage and groups like Kiss. We lost.

Mick Jagger seems to have at least sensed the peculiarity of his situation in *Some Girls* "Respectable":

Well, we're all respected in society

We don't worry about the things that we used to be
We're dropping heroin with the President

Yes, it's a problem, sir, but it can be bent...

But *Some Girls* still calls for a suspension of disbelief. It asks us to accept that these filthy rich, jet-set superstars share our common experience. It is asking too much. Jagger is miles above us, and his "blues" can only be bullshit. He and Keith Richards certainly have problems, but they ain't got no blues.

Meanwhile, in Czechoslovakia, the lines are more clearly drawn. On one hand, we have what French poet Louis Aragon has called a "Biafra of the Spirit." It is the wasteland of post-1968 official culture. On the other, we have the self-conscious, non-collaborationist underground of the "second culture."

Co-optation is not an issue there, as one of the Second Culture's spokespersons explains: "In Bohemia, the situation is essentially different, and far better than in the West, because...the first culture doesn't want us and we don't want anything to do with the first culture. This eliminates the seed of destruction: the desire for recognition, success, the winning of prizes and titles and last but not least, the material security that follows."

His name is Ivan Jirous. He is in jail today. Just a month after release from his third prison term a year ago, he was rearrested for making an unannounced speech at an art exhibit in a Prague youth club. The paintings on display, he had commented, would outlive any official youth organizations. This brought on the Czech authorities' pet charge of "organizing

a criminal disturbance of the peace" and on May 8 he landed his fourth prison sentence—one and a half years.

Plastic people.

Jirous is also artistic director of the Plastic People of the Universe, a rock band of the theatrical ex-psychedelic variety. Rock has been the main musical expression of the Second Culture, and the Plastic People its leading exponent.

They came together ten years ago, as the Kremlin's divisions demolished the exhilarating eight-month period of cultural and political freedom known as the Prague Spring.

As the underground burgeoned, so did police repression. In 1974,

record without the Plastics' knowledge. Now we too can hear that for which "vulgar is too weak a word" (Rude Pravo).

We also have an extraordinary 60-page book, *The Merry Ghetto*, sold with the record, detailing in lively color the story of the Second Culture.

The Plastic People were once heavily influenced by the Velvet Underground and Frank Zappa ("The Mothers of Invention released us for a while/from the enforced camp life/from thoughts of next working Saturday"). But, as the record jacket claims, they have done much more than simply import Western rock into an alien scene. "Their music and [poet Egon] Bondy's lyrics are saturated with the atmosphere of

"Nothing we can do can create the impression that everything is in order."

government attacks on unofficial youth activities became nationwide. Brutal raids, confiscations, arrests and trials followed. One critic noted, "Today the police are so determined to monitor every aspect of the music scene that they even break in on legally arranged concerts and check the ID cards of both audiences and musicians. What is surprising is not that there are occasional outbursts of violence, but that there are so few."

When Jirous and the Plastic People's sax and clarinetist (Vratislav Brabanec) went on trial for "organizing a disturbance of the peace" in September 1976, philosopher Jan Patocka and playwright Vaclav Havel were two members of the emerging political opposition to speak on their behalf. On the other side, the official party daily, *Rude Pravo*, published a succinct judgment: "They don't like anything that goes on in our society. They are exponents of the right who hate our system and use every means to change it."

Bootleg dissidence.

Using tapes made by the Plastics, (in 1973-74, in a castle, on mostly homemade apparatus and recording gear), partisans of the Bohemian underground in France and England pressed their first

Prague, a city where the mystic and the mundane, the absurd and the real, mingle in every day life." It's too bad this crudely produced (but worthy) collection of Plastics' pieces is all we have to go on.

Because the Plastic people are not waiting. They count on nothing. They've simply turned their backs on the First Culture and then celebrated the feat. Egon Bondy screams it:

Go ahead, make imbeciles of yourselves with expeditions to the moon
Go ahead; get as rich as you can
accept any disgrace as your own

it's got nothing to do with us.
We shall be the silent majority first to the delight of the overlords
and then to their dismay when they see we are living without them.

Who knows what might come from it all?
Fear of us breeds hatred of us
the hatred of the idiot for the normal person
the hatred of the fascist for culture
the hatred of the jailer for the jailed.

Bondy's passion is religious as he reminds his literary comrades of their calling and the eternal power of their art:

You who are poets bear the responsibility for everything concerning humankind.
You shall redeem concentration camps
and the bestialities of police
and the putrefaction of affluent regimes.

Hard working rock.

A selection by Ivan Hartel (of Birmingham University) in *The Merry Ghetto* explains the ties and commitment of the Plastic People to the workers: "Their music is a powerful testimony coming straight from their everyday experience on the factory floor. They do not try to use their artistic skills as an escape from the arid social conditions in which they live with their fellow-workers."

Bile Svetlo (White Light) sings:
...There is nothing like the production of art... it brings respect—so dear to heart.
And if the ruler doesn't like it just bow a little
and everything will be all right.
Again you have a lot of work, 2,000 crowns for a new advert... Your life is nicely led...
As for the worker it's another turn of the screw into his head...

and:

We are no Artists
We are no Poets
We are the workers

Ivan Jirous' "Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival" in *The Merry Ghetto* concludes: "In the West many people who, because of their mentality, would perhaps belong among our friends, live in confusion. Here the lines of demarcation have been drawn clearly once and for all."

"Nothing that we can do can possibly please the representatives of official culture because it cannot be used to create the impression that everything is in order. For things are not in order."

The Second Culture might find some of the Punk/New Wave rockers and reggae groups that have teamed up with the Tom Robinson Band for Britain's highly successful "Rock Against Racism" movement as "perhaps belonging among their friends."

Johnny Rotten's Sex Pistols and bands like The Clash have always noisily proclaimed their distance from tax-exile-type superstars like Rod Stewart and Jagger. There are still hopeful signs in the West. But the Plastic People and Czechoslovakia's Second Culture show us our own confusion.

Plastic People of the Universe with The Merry Ghetto is available (50 francs) from SCOPA, c/o Jasquier, 89 rue Charles De Gaulle, 91440 Bures sur Yvette, France.

Theo Blomquist is a freelance writer living in Paris.

CULTURE SHOCK

WONDERSOF-MODERNTECH-NOLOGYDEPT

A new sound recording process makes it possible to squeeze words together without distortion, making it possible to get 38 seconds of information into 30 second ad slots; this eliminates needless time wasted thinking about the message.

PERHAPS AN ADOLPH DOLL?

In the teeth of resistance from religious groups and a retail-

ers' association, the Mattel Toy Company is distributing swastika-decorated toys in West Germany.

AH! WE'D BEEN WONDERING

A recent *Variety* headline reported, "Facelift Panic Among Actresses Traced to Male Chauvinism."



FIRE FOR HIRE

Photo by
Richard
Stromberg

By Kenneth A. Gosting
and Al DiFranco

THE KID WHO LIT THE MATCH
was just a junkie.

He had been found dead on the third floor of the four-story brick building by the firefighters. They managed to save the other tenants, but not him...or the building.

Around the corner, medics were bandaging the leg of a rookie who fell through the floor trying to get to the junkie before the whole place came down on them.

On another corner, a family shivered in the cold. The kids were crying and the old man just kept telling them to shut up and be glad they were alive.

The landlord was on the scene by the time they started rolling up the hoses.

"I just spent five grand on wood panelling and paint to fix the damn place up, and now the niggers burn it down on me."

Actually, the landlord was getting ready for his next move towards picking up a cool \$175,000 on one of the nation's hottest real estate scams—arson.

This fictitious example is what firefighters and insurance companies say is one way of cashing in on a \$2 billion-a-year illicit business that costs at least 1000 lives a year.

Fire-for-Hire rings and individual acts of arson for profit are estimated to be growing by 25 percent annually. And a study in Ohio shows that one out of every three fire insurance dollars spent covers arson frauds.

According to FBI director William Webster, only about 2 percent of suspected arsons result in convictions. Webster said, "If we were honest with ourselves, we would have to say that arson has not been properly addressed."

William E. Garneau, project director for Urban Educational Systems (UES) said, "Typically, law enforcement has looked for a kid, a minority, anything they can say started the fire."

The Boston-based UES has developed a computerized Early Warning System for arson based on community action and studies of complex property records in public files. Partially financed by a \$200,000 grant from the U.S. Fire Administration, UES's Garneau and associate David Scondras said arson is usually for profit rather than the work of malicious children and pyromaniacs.

UES has a formally trained arson investigator, an investigative reporter and a computer specialist on its staff. The computer program looks at the track record of property owners and their hardships—insurance claims, outstanding mortgages. It also accounts for inflated property values and the economic facts of the neighborhood.

In the next few weeks, the Early Warning System will be concentrated on Lynn, Mass., an old mill town ten miles north of Boston, and Lowell, 30 miles outside the



city. Candidates for next year's investigation include San Francisco and several other West Coast cities.

Scondras and Garneau cite some motivations for arson:

- The rehabilitation arson. The owner quickly gets a down payment to make improvements on the property.

- The abandoned building arson. The fire is set a day or so before a clause takes effect cancelling insurance after the building has been vacated.

- The parcel creation arson. This is a fast way to clear out a spot for a parking lot or new development without the hassles of rezoning.

- The loss of business arson. The arsonists take out an insurance policy to cover each day's lost profits.

Scondras said Boston's Symphony Row district had at least 30 fires since 1973—fires that claimed at least five lives and 32 buildings with property losses estimated at \$5.8 million.

From digging through files, Scondras noticed that it was more profitable for landlords to burn their buildings than to collect rent. Some of the least desirable properties had been sold at tremendously inflated prices—just before they burned.

With the help of Symphony Tenants Organizing Project, Scondras and Garneau found that many fires were wrongly attributed to children.

"To burn the interior of a brick building it takes a whole lot of effort. Vandals do not haul 25 gallons of gasoline to the top floor, set up a plastic pool, puncture it and then leave behind a timed incendiary device to ignite the gas as it drips down to the lower floors," Garneau said.

Insurance man Ralph Jackson of the Illinois Advisory Committee on Arson Prevention said that after the fire arsonists may multiply their profits by putting in claims on five or more separate fire insurance policies. He said new computer systems are even listing phoneticized claimant names in order to catch phoney spellings used on unwitting insurance policy salespeople.

According to Jackson, the dead junkie may have indeed lit the match, "but he

probably did it for \$25 or a few hits of heroin from a professional arsonist." Jackson said sometimes organized arson rings charge 10 or 15 percent of the expected insurance payoff, "but they usually want their money upfront."

Blaming junkies, vandals and low income minorities is a good cover for arsonists. Jackson said the pros can turn over a building in as little as 30 days after buying a policy.

The first thing the arsonist does after he buys the building is sell it—to one of his co-conspirators—who then holds the fire insurance policy. The law is on the side of the mortgage holder, who usually gets paid off no matter what caused the fire.

To avoid the risk of a murder rap, most arsonists try to drive the tenants out of a building before they burn it.

There may be warning fires—fires that, according to Jackson, set the stage for the big blaze. They also give the impression that the people in the building can't keep from wrecking it.

Jackson says the arson profile also includes absentee landlords who get so far behind in their utility payments that the heat gets turned off. With the sociological deck already stacked—the less reputable their characters the better—the lucky landlord may anger his tenants enough to do the job for him.

But if being obnoxious to people won't work, according to Jackson, the arsonists can make it look like they've changed their ways and start remodeling.

"They'll pile up plenty of wood and bring in cans of paint. Not latex paint, of course, but nice flammable oil-base stuff," he said.

And so the building goes. And maybe a few people with it.

And what about the fire at the outmoded commercial building? Even if nobody gets killed, the community loses a few more dollars from the tax base, more people are out of work and there's one more charred skeleton on the urban landscape.

(This article based on a story ©1978 by Pacific News Service)

Arson for profit brings in \$2 billion a year, costs 1000 lives, and is growing by 25 percent a year. Can a computer program stop it?