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“The Beat Goes On: The Plastic People of the Universe and

the Politicization of the Second Culture: 1968 – 1976”

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A Thesis in the Field of Foreign Literature and Culture

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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Abstract

This study investigates the story of the Plastic People of the Universe (PPU), a Czech rock band formed in the wake of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia who, like the majority of Czech citizens, suffered from a multitude of injustices under totalitarian power. In 1970, the PPU were refused the right to perform and in 1975 the band is said to have created the "second culture," an alternative cultural space where a significant—if somewhat ambiguous— level of artistic freedom could be nurtured beyond the constraints and restrictions of the Communist mandate, and one which band members claimed to be apolitical.

This thesis challenges this assertion and explores whether the creation of the second culture was in fact a political statement in reaction to the Communists' anti-rock mandates, or whether it constituted a primarily aesthetic decision that nevertheless had political consequences. While the PPU were remarkable figures in terms of artistic integrity and persistence, they will likely be regarded in history as political revolutionaries, even if this role runs counter to all that they believed. The study argues that while the actions of the PPU convey the perception that they were political, essays and interviews by the PPU members themselves confirm their apolitical intent. My research methodology of extensive personal interviews, journalistic and narrative accounts, shows that the actions of the PPU counter the perception that they were political and that their performances were one of the few embers of unfettered creativity in an authoritarian state.

Dedication

To those who love art, in all its forms.

Acknowledgements

To Professor Jonathan Bolton for his endless patience, encouragement, and support of my work; Nora Hampl and Simona Bartová for making it so easy to fall in love with Prague; Sandra Frey and Chris Jones for their incredible humor and our working lunches; Peggy Nelson and Suzanne Smith for the intellectual insights and delightful conversations; to Dad, Mom, and Catherine for cheering me on every day of my life; to my dearest friends for listening; and, finally, to the PPU today: Vratislav Brabenec, Jiři Kabeš, Josef Janiček, Ivan Bierhanzl, Joe Karafiát, Ludvík Kandl and Eva Turnová. Their kindness, their spirit, and their story has made this possible.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Milan Hlavsa was the creative type. A former member of the underground experimental rock group the Primitives, he decided in September of 1968 to assemble a woefully inexperienced, motley group of teenage Czechs in pursuit of fame. Performing under the name "The Plastic People of the Universe" (PPU), the founding members—Hlavsa, Přemysl Stevich, Michal Jernek, Josef Janiček, and Jiři Kabeš—would become icons of the Czech underground four years after their formation. Their rapid rise led to their controversial classification as a "dissident" political band for their outward indifference toward the restrictive communist regime. Although the PPU insisted on maintaining an entirely apolitical stance, the irony of their viewpoint and the political effects of their 1976 trial belied the detached character of the Czech musical underground.

Although the Plastic People of the Universe's name might imply a somewhat eccentric group of musicians, the band is responsible for much more than perpetuating the bizarre in both name and performance—an impression initially based on their elaborate costumes, makeup and light shows derived from their interests in Western rock music influences and medieval mysticism. The words "Plastic People" stem from a 1967 Frank Zappa song about the pretentious, self-absorbed nature of consumerism and vanity (lyrics include: "A fine little girl, she waits for me, she's as plastic as she can be; she paints her face with plastic goo and wrecks her hair with some shampoo"); the words "of the Universe" refer to a 16th-century mystic, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim,

whose theories on the occult are echoed in the early lyrics of the band and reflect the less-traditionally religious attitudes of many involved in the underground. Yet while the spirituality of their music would undergo many changes as their artistry evolved, the initial catalyst for their work was inspired by earlier Czech groups, including Hlavsa's former band and DG307.

Like most adolescent musicians, the PPU initially wanted nothing more than to become famous—but with the sudden breakdown of the philosophical underpinnings of the liberal establishment in 1968, the cultural orbit of the band would instead leave its mark on music history as an unintentionally revolutionary cause. Their run for the rewards of celebrity as an eclectic group—or "dissidents," as conventional history controversially labels them—who began craving the fame and fortune of their Western idols, ultimately closed with their becoming one of the most important contemporary rock bands in the history of the Czech Republic. The traditional saga of the PPU entails their pursuit of legitimacy as a talented, diverse, aesthetically experimental rock group that won—although never asked for—the status of an apolitical rock band that ultimately changed the face of communist Czechoslovakian history along the way.

Imitations of Western rock stereotypes were relatively permissible in other areas of the Eastern Bloc, including Hungary and Poland, essentially based on the dubious perception that "the interest of young people in Western trends has lost its connotation of political opposition."[1] In Czechoslovakia "by contrast, some brands of pop culture are still seen as an insidious form of ideological contamination," and the lack of "socialist commitment" required of all other musicians was the cause of the PPU's inevitable

[1] Dobbs, Michael. "Western Popular Music Defies Official Czech Disfavor." The Washington Post. 2 July 1978. A1. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

political punch (Dobbs). Their story, therefore, can only be grasped by way of the controversial history preceding, surrounding, and following the band's establishment as the PPU—an event that took place in 1968, a year that would be one of the most devastating in contemporary Czech history.

As a result of the unstable, tumultuous political and economic climate following the orthodox Soviet reengagement of Czechoslovakia, the hope of 1968 would yield to the bitter oppression of 1969. The government underwent a major upheaval as Communist Party Chairman Antonín Novotný was replaced by Alexander Dubček in January of that year. This transition led to the brightest eight months Czechoslovakia had seen since the presidency of T. G. Masaryk after the breakdown of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918. Dubček was largely credited for implementing "Socialism with a Human Face," which was a philosophy requiring the government to revitalize the remaining presence of an inert, indifferent bureaucracy and enable a new liberalization under communism. Dubček also helped implement the Action Programme, an initiative that would serve as a catalyst for various political and economic reforms and a more liberal approach to the essence of socialism. Both of these were essential to "consolidate the unity of all working people, to harmonize their efforts, to maintain social order and discipline."[2]

Dubček's presence would best be represented by the Prague Spring's inspiration

for change and the new progressivism increasingly evident in the intellectual and artistic circuits of Czechoslovakia.

> The year 1968 was one during which politics East and West became, at least temporarily, a testing ground of new ideas and discoveries. In

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[2] Williams, Kieran. "Liberalization." The Prague Spring and its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics: 1968-1970. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 17. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

> Prague, the ideological commotion was felt keenly in the details of daily life: Previously banned books went on sale; films from the West arrived in cinemas; music clubs filled with long-haired beatniks; students packed their bags and traveled West for the first time.…With the gradual cessation of censorship and the growing possibility of unrestricted travel, information and ideas moved east to west and west to east in a way that was unique in the experience of a postwar divided Europe.[3]

This was a socialist democracy in action, and along with its relative leniency came the social convulsions usually associated with the intersection of youth, politics, hippie culture, drug use, and experimental music. The combined force and interaction of these three elements alone, evolved into one of the most permissive periods that many Czechs had ever seen.

However the dream of "Socialism with a human face" as a cultural revival, the freedom of countercultural expression, the zeal of reform triumphing over stale bureaucracy and authoritarian power, was not to last for long. While the months to follow spring and midsummer of 1968 would prove to be some of the most liberal, the hoped-for bloom of the flower of Czech liberalism was to be nipped in the bud. Deep in the night of August 20, 1968, Soviet tanks would begin to be airlifted over the slumbering country, and occupy the largely unsuspecting city of Prague by morning. 175,000 Warsaw Pact troops would assure the demise of Dubček's promising leadership and make clear that the orthodox communist ideology of the 1950s had not—as so many wanted to believe—disappeared.

The time that followed the invasion of August 21 was one of enormous

bureaucratic, military, and political upheaval. Though the Czech reaction was largely non-violent, the crackdown would continue until 1989. During this time, with the

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[3] Horn, Gerd-Rainer, P. Kenney. "1968 East and West: Visions of Political Change and Student Protest from across the Iron Curtain." Transnational Moments of Change: Europe 1945, 1968, 1989. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004. 119. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

encouragement of the Soviet army, normalization infiltrated most public areas, intellectual gatherings were disbanded, and many in respected institutional positions—such as public service, education, medicine—were dismissed.

> Most Czechs have watched passively while the regime has systematically purged the Party and state, the economy, the arts, the universities, and the media of anyone who dares to speak critically, independently, or even intelligently about what the regime defines as politics—an infinitely elastic category (Ash, Timothy Garton. "Czechoslovakia Under Ice."[4]

The effects were debilitating, and as the animosity between Czechs and Soviets continued to remain palpable, Dubček continued to try to influence his followers, as well as the "realist" faction that "supported Dubček's attempts to convince the public that discipline and unity would protect reforms against Soviet and hardline subversion, but they added that problems lay also in certain revisionist ideas and spokesmen, and that only by correcting these deformations could reforms proceed" (Williams 192). Dubček's mixed message contributed to his eventual demise as first secretary of the Communist party and the essence of the ideological agenda that had been promulgated by him. The Prague Spring was "usually understood as a clash between two groups on the level of real power: those who wanted to maintain the system as it was and those who wanted to reform it. It is frequently forgotten, however, that this encounter was merely the final act and the inevitable consequence of a long drama originally played out chiefly in the theatre of the spirit and the conscience of society."[5] It was clear: the Prague Spring had ended.

The Moscow Protocol that had initially kept Dubček in office, via his implementation of Soviet regulations, ultimately ensured that his efforts to move forward

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[4] The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe. London: Penguin, 1999. 56. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

[5] Havel, Vaclav. "The Power of the Powerless." Open Letters: Selected Writings 1965 – 1990. New York: Vintage Books, 1991. 151. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

with the reformist ideals of the Prague Spring would remain minimal. Consequently, in April 1969, Gustáv Husák, a strict communist who had served as a party official in Slovakia in the late ’40s and even served prison time as a result of Stalin’s purges in the ’50s, was appointed First Secretary of the Communist Party after Dubček’s resignation. By April of that year, Husák began calling for “silencing the media, eliminating leading officials most abhorred by Moscow, and renewing the party’s political monopoly” (Williams 226). This would be the beginning of a relentless effort by Husák to initiate a new government policy—a change that would ultimately be seen as “normalizing” the state of the country, thus commencing the period known as “Normalization.” Though the fundamental meaning of this term would differ between various groups of Czechoslovaks and Soviets, it would effectively mean a return to order in Czechoslovakia and “restoring normal political life, i.e., indirect, oligarchic governance” (145). Under the imperative of Soviet force, the doctrine to “normalize the situation means to safeguard the achievements of socialism, to rebuff action” (159).

By 1970, the effectiveness of normalization had extended to the arts and intellectual circles particularly, stifling the creative energies of those who had originally believed they could live comfortably within a socialist democracy under Dubček. They found that once he officially resigned from office, the straining liberal idealism of Czechoslovakia weakened further, and bands like the PPU began to confront a host of obstacles and restrictions as the new regime’s noose tightened: “The first sign of normalization on the Czechoslovak rock scene appeared in January 1970 when Prague officials closed the city’s leading rock clubs.…As the number of clubs dwindled, rock

bands found it increasingly difficult to obtain bookings."[6] However, the suppression of creativity did not mean it totally disappeared; if the PPU's music could not be played in the popular clubs as before, their performances could take place elsewhere. This continued defiance, sidestepping, and ambivalence toward the new regime was reflected in the general assessment that the music underground of Czechoslovakia would have to try to manipulate the system: "The end of the Dubček era meant the end (until 1989) of liberalism in official policy towards rock, among other things. For twenty years, the Prague regime was to remain suspicious of all rock music."[7]

In the meantime, tyranny was the coin of the realm in Czechoslovakia. As the PPU, intellectuals, and artists alike found ways to support the workings and secrecy of an underground culture, others expressed outrage. Public protests by Czech youth against normalization were common and the student protests against censorship and other mandates of normalization reached a pinnacle with the self-immolation of Jan Palach on January 19, 1969; the effects of this incident were soon referred to as the "Palachiáda." Palach is best remembered for setting himself aflame in Wenceslas Square as an expression of freedom against shifting state of the government, creating a public outcry across the country. Still, as much as the suicide posed a sharp challenge to Husák and the new government, those in control decided to ignore the message of Palach's immolation, deeming it anti-Soviet: "Though [politicians] paid tribute to Palach's courage, their preoccupation with order alienated the people, especially youth, who now saw even leading reformers as 'them' rather than 'us….'(Williams 188). Another unintended

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[6] Ryback, Timothy. Rock Around the Bloc: A History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. 141. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
[7] Ramet, Sabrina. "Rock Music and Counterculture." Social Currents in Eastern Europe: The Sources and Meaning of the Great Transformation. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. 223. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

consequence of Palach's act was to further convince many centrist liberalizers that the country would only continue to lurch from crisis to crisis unless a new style of party leadership was adopted.

The death of Palach however would, at least on the surface, be mourned in the minds and hearts of a number of Czechs—some, sympathizing with his intent, would drift slowly into the fold of an emerging underground shared by his defiance. "Palach University" became an underground intellectual community; *Palach Press* became part of a subterranean genre of publications known as *samizdat* (Russian for "self-publish"); combined, these kept his message alive. Palach's action not only indicated the harshness of the new communist government's regulations, but served as a symbolic catalyst for increasing protests and perhaps less obviously, encouraged the politically averse realm of the underground.

In the shadow of political turmoil, clandestine music performances were happening all over the city of Prague: "The Plastics were one of a number of avant-garde rock and jazz bands of increasing popularity through the 1970s, including the groups DG 307, Alea jazz, Adept, and Michael Kocáb's group *Pražský výběr* [Prague's Choice]."[8] By early 1969 the PPU had been together for a year, collaborating, experimenting, playing rock shows at venues like Arena and F-Klub, and even producing their first album, *Muž bez uší* (Man Without Ears). Ivan Martin Jirous, the PPU's artistic director, felt "the establishment has no power to prevent those who reject all advantages that flow from being professional musicians from performing" (Ryback 143). The young men who had hoped to perform music similar to their psychedelic, experimental Western

[8] Long, Michael. Making History: Czech Voices of Dissent and the Revolution of 1989. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005. 9. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

counterparts believed they were on their way to establishing themselves as modern rock artists. Arguably, the basis of Dubček's reforms may not have been lost on some Czech citizens as easily as they were on the habitants of government offices. Indeed, the PPU's idealistic ways did not go unnoticed, for there were still those in power suspicious of the group's intent. Their disassociation from the government, along with that of other intellectuals, artists, and writers who were still holding on to the reforms of the Prague Spring, implied ambivalence toward the tight restrictions put into place by the new power. The band considered this to be a disassociation from the mainstream and a push to embrace a coexistence, later be referred to in Vaclav Benda's 1978 essay as a "Parallel 'Polis.'" It represented "a sense of *moral commitment* and *mission*" and a pragmatic indifference toward the state.[9] This second culture, or "Second Polity," is:

> [S]ometimes termed "para-politics"…or "anti-politics"….[It] referred to the whole range of activities which went beyond the merely personal actions of individuals…and extended to movements for human rights and civil freedom; for peace and opposition to nuclear weapons or military service; for independently organized education and for samizdat publication; for the support of the poor; for free trade unions; for religious freedom; and for women's rights. Although usually regarded as 'non-political' by their proponents, these movements were the closest approximation to, or surrogate for, political life in systems which excluded politics in the normal sense. Some of their practitioners regarded these activities as constituting embryonic political parties, or, more generally, a political opposition.[10]

The PPU and the underground soon began to flourish as a thriving intellectual, artistic realm, made up of many soon to be banned or imprisoned Czech citizens that would produce some of the most important literary and musical works of the twentieth century.

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[9] Benda, Vaclav. "The Parallel 'Polis.'" Civic Freedom in Central Europe: Voices from Czechoslovakia. H. Gordon Skilling, Paul Wilson Ed. London: Macmillan, 1991. 36. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
[10] Skilling, H. Gordon. Samizdat and an Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989. 8-9. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

Husák's regime however, attempted to prevent all this when in January 1970, along with the closing of popular rock clubs, the government implemented a registration process for Czechoslovak musicians that required them to register in order to obtain a performance license. The PPU was one of Prague's most popular psychedelic bands at the time, partly based on admiration for their refusal to change their style to the straight, clean look, their use of Czech lyrics, and their insistence that "they never set out to be symbols of resistance."[11] While the PPU were initially certified by the government, within two weeks the approval was revoked, officials saying that the band's music was "morbid" and that it "would have a 'negative social impact'" (Ryback 146). As a result, the band ceased to receive state funding and "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. Still, the obstacles set by Husák's party were shortsighted and ineffective: "…instead of packing away their instruments, the Plastic People began their underground career" they became, "the 'second culture'—not an opposition, but a separate artistic underground."[12] This was a critical juncture for the band, as their refusal to compromise their authenticity energized a subterranean realm that allowed their artistic director Jirous—or "Magor" ("the crazy one"), as he was known to friends and fans—quickly to become the guru of the emerging Czechoslovakian psychedelic rock scene. This scene was called the "second culture," and it was a significant—if somewhat ambiguous—reaction to the cultural injustices of the government. Like many Czechs, the PPU felt they were subjected to a

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[11] Ascherson, Neal. "Revolution in the Head." The Observer. 4 June 2006. 12 June 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2006/jun/04/theatre1>.
[12] Pareles, Jon. "Czechoslovak Band That Suffered For Its Art." The New York Times 24 April 1989: C13. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

multitude of inane injustices under totalitarian power. They wanted to create a realm of truth—one that would enable them to coexist as a separate, distinct, "second cultural entity" that was free from the mandates of the official, communist "first culture."[13] "Rock was not inherently anti-Communist (neither were rock musicians inherently anti-Communists)....[R]elationships between the socialist state and rock were more often symbiotic than contradictory, hence many rock musicians were more interested in 'adapting' the status quo, rather than in destroying it; rock 'revolt' was not *against* the dominant culture, but *within* it."[14] It was within this context that the PPU claimed that their musical statement—namely, to continue playing—meant adapting an antiestablishment or political meaning, alongside the prescribed, mainstream culture. This was a dicey bit of thinking, especially at a time when any refutation of the government could be seen as a political statement or a challenge to the status quo.

I will argue that the emergence of the second culture was an unintended political statement in reaction to the communists' anti-rock mandates. Although it was felt by insiders to be an aesthetic realm, separate and distinct from the first culture, the underground's internal perception was at odds with that of the dominant regime. The communists' inclination—the external perception—was to punish the insubordination of those dissenting from the "normalizing" mandates required by the regime. Herein rests the inherent contradiction of the movement in terms of how it conceptualized itself and its ultimate impact on Czech society—that is, as occupying a self-governing, idealistic realm, separate from the shadows of a tyrannical government.

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[13] Havel, Vaclav. "Public Enemy." Disturbing the Peace. Ed. Paul Wilson. New York: Random House, 1990." 127.

[14] Pekacz, Jolanta. "Did Rock Smash the Wall?: The Role of Rock in Political Transition." Popular Music 13:1 (1994): 48. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

In the first twenty years of the PPU's existence, reports show that they consistently viewed their work as being within the context of a somewhat independent realm, adrift in a despotic sea; or, correlating back to Benda's *Parallel "Polis,"* apart from—but indifferent to—the machinations of the state. The group may have believed they could remain an underground, anti-utopian Utopia; but in the eyes of the establishment, they were making a political statement. This expression of social differentiation was an attempt to separate the moral and social from the political, although in the broad sense, it is difficult to see how any sphere of music could avoid drifting into the political sphere. My study of the PPU's lyrics, essays, and reflections on their 1976 trial will demonstrate how their artistic integrity could never have existed alongside the official culture without touching a political nerve. It will further assess the significance of their departure from the orthodoxies of the communist realm.

The matter of the PPU's refusal to conform or acknowledge their political impact is still debated. Hlavsa contended in a *Wall Street Journal* article in 1997, eight years after the fall of Communist rule in Czechoslovakia, what Jirous had already stated in his 1975 essay "Report on The Third Czech Musical Revival"—that the PPU's intent had no ties to a political agenda: "…the Plastic People were hardly political activists.…[T]he band," Hlavsa recalls, "was 'totally oblivious' to the political situation."[15] Like many bands in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in the late '60s, the group's ambitions didn't extend much beyond dressing up in loud outfits and covering the songs of groups like the Doors, the Fugs and especially the Velvet Underground. Their artistic technique, however, was rudimentary; '[I]t was not so much about how well you played,' says

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[15] Reed, Danielle. "Underground Czech Band Resurfaces." Wall Street Journal. 22 July 1998, Eastern ed.: 1. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

Hlavsa. "We weren't trying to play like Jimi Hendrix. It was more about the feeling" (Reed). Just as did other psychedelic rock bands in the 1960s, "they just wanted to play rock-and-roll and dress as they pleased. But the Czechoslovak Government saw the Plastic People's independence as dissent and by treating the band with increasing harshness turned it into an underground legend" (Pareles, "Czechoslovak Band"). Their refusal to concede to the demands of the government was, as Havel would state in his 1978 essay "The Power of the Powerless," a decision to live within *their* truth. Havel, who became a close friend and contributor to the band's music after their 1976 trial, says in a 1988 prison essay in "Letters to Olga"—a conversation between him and his wife is mentioned that captures the essence of the plight of the PPU—that "the artist who is capable of subordinating his art to life—temporarily at least—is ultimately more interesting than the artist who sacrifices everything to his art. The latter will end up sacrificing his art as well, because he strips it of meaning."[16] But the PPU were defending precisely the idea that as artists, they could sacrifice everything to their art. The issue at hand was not the refutation of conformity, but the principle of being able to perform in whatever shape or form the band wished.

However, it was the external perception held by the communist regime and Western news outlets from the 1970s (which frequently refer to the band as dissidents) that would decide the real—albeit harsh—truth, rendering unlikely the possibility that the PPU would merely be left alone: "although independent activities were in a sense conducted more freely than actions within the official sphere, those who carried them out were always conscious of the boundaries of such 'freedom' and the high price involved for crossing them" (Skilling 9). This quotation makes clear the assumption that the

[16] Havel, Vaclav. Letters to Olga: June 1979-September 1982. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988. 97.

boundaries crossed were, in fact, political. The PPU's insistence on maintaining an apolitical position in spite of the abuses of Husák's government was a decision plagued by claims of dissent and undertones of naïveté, even though the majority of members remain adamant about their indifferent feelings toward the state and their raw dedication to their music. "It is a form of social self-defence, a barrier against complete degeneration" (Skilling 75). Although Hlavsa said "[the PPU] didn't play this role intentionally—it was forced upon us from the outside," the debate about the PPU's insubordination and its effects on communist authority remains, to this day, the key argument as to the group's role in the collapse of the regime (Pareles, "Czechoslovak Band"). The issue at hand is therefore the internal versus external perception of the situation. The PPU, along with a great majority of the underground community, inspired a multitude of essays arguing that their triumph was in their ability to ignore the oppressions of the regime and enable an almost transcendental and mental secession from the government, one that subsequently created an engaged, more productive community quite counter to what most would have imagined.

Jiřina Šiklová's argument, based on what she calls "independent culture," admits that there was a dependence on the political regime as a testing ground for how far the boundaries could be pushed; however, she contends that the intent of independent activities was founded on the following:

> a. The feeling of a "clear conscience" deriving from one's own work and activity, and sense of inner freedom and aesthetic elevation above the reality of this "real" or "goulash" socialism.
> b. The creation of a cultural community of like-minded people who offer each other support.
> c. The creation and maintenance of a certain level of culture and of cultural and moral values that are independent of the political regime (Skilling 103).

The argument postulates that the underground community's insiders found themselves in a social order that genuinely believed in its apolitical intent; however, to the outside—to the intolerant regime that arrested band members several times and originated the beginning of Charter 77, and to Western reports that the movement was essentially made up of dissident pacifists—it was seen inevitably as a political provocation and needed to be acknowledged as a dissident culture.

In order for the PPU's claims to be best validated, this paper will delve into an analysis of the music produced by the PPU from late 1968 up to their trial in 1976. This period was the most prolific, innovative, and experimental for the band—at time when the underground community was thriving. My assessment of the PPU's work will determine not just the sincerity of their apolitical stance, but their creative inspirations, their innovative ideas, and the conclusion that, their passion aside, their efforts could not have been separated from the political backlash. I will argue that while they were, indeed, a band performing music without political intent, their Western-inspired beginnings, eccentric lyrics, and clandestine shows were an indirect catalyst for the human-rights demands of the late 1970s—part of the ironic legacy that resulted in their exalted artistic status in the contemporary music circuit.

Chapter 2

Lyrical Interpretation

As a component of the underground Czech music community, the PPU had much in common with the countercultural movements proliferating in the West. The PPU's name, for instance, stems from American rock artist Frank Zappa's Mothers of Invention song "Plastic People," which centered on disdain for materialistic, artificial lifestyles. The PPU were also known to play cover songs celebrating similarly unorthodox American artists, including The Velvet Underground, The Doors and Jimi Hendrix. The fundamental nature of the second culture was to exist in a world that permitted what the Communist government would not allow for: creative expression and musical experimentation, as well as physical and spiritual freedom —a dicey proposition, by any rational calculation. Yet, whether or not the rise of the PPU was simply an Eastern European version of the proliferation of enigmatic, experimental, social, and politically questioning music of the West has long been an uncertainty.

When Hlavsa, Jiři Števich and Michal Jernek began rehearsing in 1967, the band's formation was rooted in nothing more than post-adolescent yearning: "The only reason we set up the band was to look cool in front of girls and an electric guitar was really something. And there was really nothing more to it at the beginning although people often ascribe more than that to it."[17] The PPU began as a group initially playing Western songs and singing English lyrics, but by the early 1970s began to sing predominantly in Czech. I will, in my analysis, examine the intent of this change and assess the regime's

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[17] The Plastic People of the Universe: Live 1997. Dir. Václav Kučera. Levné Knihy, 2007, end: 00:49. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

handling of the linguistic shift and show how the band's primary indifference towards the Communist state is most obviously demonstrated in their experimental performances and, most of all, their lyrics. This was a key factor as to why the PPU were deemed in opposition to the state, even though their obscure, not inherently political, and occasionally incomprehensible lyrics confused the authorities. Yet to the PPU's audience, the lyrics resonated with the historical experience of each generation. Consider for example, Long's reference to the song "Twenty":

> While at first glance the lyrics might seem mildly raucous or indelicate to the outsider, the subtle political references were obvious to Czech listeners of the 1960s and 1970s. Twenty-, forty-, and sixty-year-olds are indexical references to critical moments in Czechoslovakia's history. Considering the time of the song's writing, the generation of twenty-year-olds bore witness to 1968 and Normalization. Their parents, the forty-year-olds, were themselves youths when Czechoslovakia became Communist after the elections of 1948. The sixty-year-olds were the youth of the nation when Czechoslovakia became a Protectorate of the Third Reich in 1938. Indeed, each generation had seen its hopes and dreams demolished by political forces beyond its control (Long 10).

The interpretation of PPU songs might possibly shed an element of understanding on some of the nascent yearnings of Czech identity. When the band first began performing as a cover band for Western music, they sang in English. Jirous called English lyrics "the lingua franca of rock" although with the transition to singing original music with Czech lyrics it became less essential to their establishment as a creative, unique, band of the underground.[18] It was also the band's decision to sing in their native language that was the catalyst for what they would become, as it allowed for their audience to understand their artistic uniqueness.

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[18] Jirous, Ivan Martin, et al. "Report on the Third Czech Music Revival." Views from the Inside: Czech Underground Literature and Culture (1948– 1989): Manifestoes – Testimonies – Documents. Ed. Martin Machovec. Praha: Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy v Praze, 2006. 29. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

Paul Wilson, a Canadian who both sang with the PPU in their formative years and was able to translate for the band, influenced this transition in part, but it was when Vratislav Brabenec, a young and talented saxophonist, arrived that the band began to sing in Czech. Brabenec suggested that while the English lyrics were true to original form, Czech audiences would be offered a distinct connection to the PPU if they could understand and interpret the words. This transition was crucial not only in securing the PPU’s importance as an influential rock band, but to its role in raising a Czech consciousness among the underground audiences for which it performed. The PPU’s utilization of Czech lyrics alone carried elements of national pride that acknowledged the trials of recent Czech history and enabled the band’s distinction as an innovative Czech rock band.

By 1971 the band had increasingly become “an important rock group that proved one could survive without making compromises” to either the Czech government or the conventions of rock ‘n’ roll (Jirous 15). Compared to Czechoslovakia’s other popular artists of the time, such as Karel Gott and Michal Prokop, the PPU’s lyrics were not mainstream; their experimental style and themes appealed more to the curious audiences that would embrace them, strengthening the belief and existence of a second culture.

That both "official" (recognized by the state) and "unofficial" rock and roll existed in Czechoslovakia was an open secret. The bands that were of the official ilk were acknowledged by the Communist authorities on the basis that they obeyed the rules set by the government. This included keeping their hair cut short, playing music only with upbeat rhythms, and singing songs on topics that both appealed to the mainstream

and were deemed appropriate. This was not what the PPU intended to disobey but instead preferred to ignore. As a result:

> Their style of composition and performance was diametrically opposed to the sentimental, romantic style of the 'officially' sanctioned crooner Karel Gott and other popular singers and bands. Nor did the Plastics' music find much in common with mainstream jazz of the same period. The Plastics' compositions are characterized by dissonant, percussion-driven music—often without an obvious melodic line and little harmony—supported by blaring and, at times, jarring tones from brass and wind instruments (Long 9).

The PPU were not about to conform to the outlines of how music should be performed and, further, the band's outward appearance—long hair, bizarre dress—might imply that their political stance was a very far cry from Husák's "normalized" society. Western art-rock music wasn't considered uncommon within the context of the self-expressive subcultural norms of the '60s and '70s. Additionally, their insistence that they were apolitical was, and has been since, their enduring dilemma as musicians.

The band's eclectic approach to music and deviation from mainstream culture and politics was a jumpstart to a new movement, which was eventually named the third Czech musical revival by the band's artistic director, Jirous: "a period that began in the early 1970s, most probably about 1973" (Jirous 10). As a result of the PPU's individualistic, outward reaching style and Jirous's creative intuition, the second culture began to flourish.

Frank Zappa, one of the PPU's leading influences, was famous for his outrageous lyrics and wild sensibility. In *Views from the Inside*, Paul Wilson notes that: "The influence of Zappa, the Velvet Underground and the Fugs, of course, can be traced in all this, sometimes quite specifically. But the powerful atmosphere the music generated—

and still generates—comes straight from the band's own collective genius."[19] The PPU appreciated Zappa for his musical aesthetics, leaving aside his well-known lyrical tantrums against the American government.

> 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.[20]

It was Zappa's obscurity—both lyrically and performance-wise—that caught their attention. Richie Unterberger, an American journalist and author of "Unknown Legends of Rock 'n' Roll," quotes Hlavsa: "Zappa was quite well known in Czechoslovakia at the time…perhaps thanks to his pervasive irony, which is the cornerstone of the Czech mentality."[21] The PPU also shows a strong affinity for New York based band, The Velvet Underground, whose front man was Lou Reed. PPU members frequently performed Velvet Underground covers, but not to the extent of usurping their primary mission of establishing their own individual style:

> The music of the Plastic People evolved into psychedelic and brooding performances that emulated the Velvet Underground, often playing direct covers. But they also played original material. Above all, the Plastics were not willing to compromise their sound or performance, not at all.[22]

Along with the lyrics, Hlavsa's tactics as front man of the band—singing in Czech and

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[19] Wilson, Paul. "What's It Like Making Rock 'n' Roll In a Police State?" Jirous, Ivan Martin, et al. Views from the Inside. Czech Underground Literature and Culture (1948– 1989): Manifestoes – Testimonies – Documents. Ed. Martin Machovec. Praha: Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy v Praze, 2006. 39 – 40. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
[20] Mitchell, Tony. "Mixing Pop and Politics: Rock Music in Czechoslovakia before and after the Velvet Revolution." Popular Music11.2 (1992): 189. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
[21] Unterberger. Richie. Home Page. "Unknown Legends of Rock 'n' Roll: Psychedelic Unknowns, Mad Geniuses, Punk Pioneers, Lo-Fi Mavericks & More." 2006. 1 September 2007 <http://www.richieunterberger.com/ppu.html>. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.
[22] Velinger, Jan, P. Horakova, I. Willoughby. "A Brief Look at 'Protest' Music Plus the Underground Scene in Czechoslovakia from 1968-1989." 17 November 2004. 29 November 2007 <http://www.radio.cz/en/article/60377>. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

working the crowd—were critical to the PPU's ability to communicate with an audience. The lyrics of each song were sung with a deep emphatic voice, a unique element of the band's style. The musical style itself therefore, is an interpretable message in its own right.

> [T]he Plastics' music was – and still is today – very weighted toward the lower registers, somewhat ponderous and unmelodic, moving forward in deliberate sections, each with its own structure and mood (Wilson 39-40).

The singing of these words rises over the band's weighted rhythms, illuminating the overall darkness of the music, even if at times the lyrics appear nonsensical. This is precisely what the PPU had intended to capture:

> [T]he fundamental characteristic of their music is their use of the human voice as an instrument with which to address people…The voice articulating something is dangerous and bands that do not want to sing degenerated lyrical nonsense or do not have the courage…to sing lyrics that genuinely communicate something to people, solve the problem by leaving the voice out altogether (Jirous 21).

Unfortunately the band's hope for recognition abroad would not be achieved until 1976, due largely to a factor they hoped to avoid: political persecution. Fame overseas before 1976 would prove difficult as both the language and style of their music didn't quite connect in London or New York the same way it did in Prague.

> The albums…did not have huge followings even in the Western underground; they sold to small, extremely specialized audiences, the music (apart from the fact that it was sung in an unfamiliar language) being too difficult and challenging even for many adventurous rock listeners (Unterberger).

One possibility for this is that the band's music was difficult to record due to their inability to access proper recording machinery. In fact, the band's lack of proper recording facilities was a notable hindrance in their ability to penetrate the underground music scene in other parts of the world.

> From 1968 to 1970, the Plastic People were recognized as professionals by the government, which provided equipment, rehearsal space and official bookings. But the group's license was revoked in 1970. So the band scrounged and…built homemade amplifiers using speakers from transistor radios.[23]

Yet even if the music had been translatable, it would have been lost on foreign audiences. While English lyrics have for decades transcended international borders, this would not be the case for a difficult—somewhat remote language—spoken by the citizens of a small, totalitarian state in Eastern Europe with an entirely different sense of the meaning of "underground":

> [I]n the early 1960s, the idea of the underground was theoretically formulated and established as a movement, that some of those who gained recognition and fame in the underground came into contact with official culture…, which enthusiastically accepted them and swallowed them up as it accepts and swallows up new cars, new fashions or anything else. In Bohemia, the situation is essentially different, and far better than in the West, because we live in an atmosphere of absolute agreement: the first culture doesn't want us and we don't want anything to do with the first culture (Jirous 30-31).

The band's credibility within the Czech underground was powerful, yet, with the lack of English lyrics in their repertoire, it is unlikely that the band would have achieved fame had the band's 1976 trial not occurred: "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" (Mitchell 201). This obscurity would disappointingly, but inevitably, be their fate as musicians.

Throughout nearly all of the PPU's albums there are several themes that remain a constant over the course of their career. Initially, and as might be expected of culture in the 60s, several of their earlier albums' lyrical content pertains to drugs, drinking, and sex

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[23] Pareles, Jon. "Milan Hlavsa, Rock Star of a Revolution, Dies at 49." New York Times 8 January 2001. 4 October 2008 <http://query. nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=C07E1DC153AF93BA35752C0A9679 C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all>. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

with titles such as: “Drunk as a Skunk,” “Fly in the Morning Beer,” “Young Girls,” “Toxic Chemicals,” “That Which I Will Eat and Drink,” and less obviously, “Song of the Fafejta Bird About Two Unearthly Worlds.” This last song, rarely addressed in Czech coverage of the PPU, was explained by bassist Ivan Bierhanzl during a personal interview with the band in Prague in February 2008; Bierhanzl noted that “Fafejta” was the surname of a Czech pharmacist known for administering more than just prescriptions.[24] In addition to the unruly side of life in the 60’s and 70’s, the PPU wrote a series of songs with religious titles that correlate to themes of religion and death: “Exodus,” “I Have Sinned,” “Mass,” “Elegy,” “Epitaph,” “For It Is The Lord’s Passover,” “Samson,” “Sermon on the Mount,” “Like an Apple is My Dear,” and “Yesterday On Sunday.” However there is also a consistent thread of animal-related themes—snake, tiger, ox, swine—and nothing quite as prevalent as birds. Some songs include: “Kanárek” (“Little Canary”), “Not Even a Chicken Will Be Harmed by Prudence,” “Early Bird,” “Apocalyptic Bird,” and, again, “The Song of the Fafejta Bird….” As it is difficult to devise an analysis for each of these songs—and many are indecipherable as, even today, the band is somewhat unsure of the history of the lyrics—I will look closely at three of the PPU’s songs from the three pre-trial albums released between 1969 and 1975: *Muž bez uší (Man without Ears), Vožralej jak slíva (Drunk as a Plum) and Egon Bondy’s Happy Hearts Club Banned* (a wordplay on the Beatles’ *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*). In addition to illustrating their apolitical stance, the songs will disclose their gradual progression from adolescent musicians to art-rock contemporaries with insights into their unique lyrics and subject matter, their evolving musical style, and their increasing impact on their audience.

[24] Interview with Ivan Bierhanzl, Prague, February 2008.

Album I: *Muž bez uší (Man without Ears)*

In Tom Stoppard's play, *Rock 'n' Roll*, one of the first songs he features is the PPU's "The Universe Symphony and Melody about Plastic Doctor," the first track on the band's first album: *Muž bez uší*. "The Universe Symphony…" is a song that carries an upbeat rhythm, at times reminiscent of The Beach Boys and with lyrics that, while obscure, reflect their affinity for otherworldliness. It was the first song to truly represent the band and now—when listened to in a popular, contemporary context—it is vital to understand both the state of mind of the band, the origin of their name, and the audience to whom they were singing.

One of the difficulties in analyzing the lyrics is the varied interpretations, both among PPU scholars, outside translators and the band's own translations. This is largely due to the surreal words and concepts selected by the band that, when translated into English, tend to lose the nuances and effect the band intended for the Czech-speaking audience. In the book, *The Plastic People of the Universe Texty*, the song "The Universe Symphony" is written as a two part song: "The Universe Symphony…" and "Melody About Plastic Doctor." This piece illustrates the mystical interests of the band with nearly four pages of lyrics and divided into subjects including "Mercury" "Venus" and other planets, in addition to "Plastic Doctor." "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*" (Jirous 13):

<u>The Universe Symphony</u>
Beautiful is world
But Plastic People do not see it
Beautiful is flowers

But Plastic People do not see it
Beautiful is sunset
But Plastic People do not see it
Only once thing is for they nice
Plastic People in Underground
You can doing more and more!
Doing once again!
Plastic People in Underground
Are waiting on "the train"
They drinking, smoking all alone
All day and all of the night
Plastic People in underground
Every man self feel fine[25]

While on the Czech news website, *Britské Listy*, they read as the following:

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[26]

These lyrics are demonstrative of how the band saw itself and the world around them in their initial youthful, imitative nature along with their fascination with Western music (Zappa's "Plastic People"). Additionally, the lyrics are devoid of aggressive insinuations, perhaps indicative of their hopeful spirituality, yet increasing disillusionment with the post-Prague Spring setting. The inspiration for the band's songs was comprised of shared sentiments and collaborative effort within this milieu, the result of which is found in each song. The themes represented on this album are representative not just of the mood of the late 1960s in Czechoslovakia, but a unified contribution:

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[25] Riedel, Jaroslav. The Plastic People of the Universe Texty. Praha: Mata, 2001. 37-38.
[26] Pilař, Martin. "On Various Aspects of Going/by/ the Underground in Bohemia." 24 November 1998. 12 September 2007 <http://www.blisty.cz/files/isarc/ 9811/ 1998 1124h.html>. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

> In addition to cover tunes, of course, the Plastics had their own growing repertoire, a lot of it based on a strange cosmo-mythological blend of everyday detail and mystical speculation. A lot of the texts or ideas were fed to them by Jirous or his wife, and when a poem or an idea caught Hlavsa's fancy, he would brood on it and then come to rehearsal with the bass line and the structure worked out in detail, with parts for the other instruments merely roughed out. He knew from the start what he wanted the final result to sound like, but there was always room in the original scheme for the rest of us to invent (Wilson 39-40).

While *Muž bez uší* may have only been the band's first album, their alleged adolescent naïveté represented the beginnings of a long-term progression into their unique musical experimentation.

Album II: *Vožralej Jak Slíva (Drunk as a Plum)*

By late 1972, Prague's underground had begun to grow weary. Yet the coming of 1973 was about to change all of that. According to Jirous it was a pivotal time for reinventing the spirit of the underground:

> I have a feeling that 1973 was a decisive year in overcoming that crisis. People had to stop relying on the fact that something would once again enable musicians to play, poets to publish and artists to exhibit…If the world is never going to be any different than it is now, there is no need to waste your time waiting for salvation. We must learn to live in the existing world in a way that is both joyful and dignified (Jirous 22).

During that year—though the specific date is never quite specified by anyone in the underground—the third Czech music revival began:

> First of all, two new bands were formed at that time…at the same time, communal events began to take place in which bands with differing musical orientations participated; the intolerance that existed between rock music and other musical forms disappeared and people began to pay more attention to the things that bound them together in opposition to the cultural policies of the establishment than to differences in taste or their aversion to various types of artistic expression (21).

This was around the time that the Plastic People of the Universe began to record their second album *Vožralej jak slíva* (1973-1975). Created at the beginning of the Third Czech music revival, it was a significant experimental project following *Muž bez uší*. One of the album's most popular songs is the last track, "Mír," meaning "Peace," which is demonstrative not only of the stylistic evolution of the band over the previous seven years, but also of a marked shift from their more upbeat rhythms performed on *Muž bez uší*. The music alone seems more reactive, rather than hopeful and reflective, as the music of the first album was. This song in particular, which lasts a meager one minute twenty-three seconds, includes the lyrics in the last five seconds:

> Peace, peace, peace
> Is like shit-house paper.

While these lyrics may seem base and simplistic, there is a divergence from the band's first album and a distinctive effort being made in comparison with their earlier work. The play on words, of course, is also a trademark of the band's irreverent style.

> In Czech, the word *mír*, 'peace,' finds its rhyme with the final syllable of *hajzlpapír*, 'shit-house paper.' The ridicule of official propaganda and Communist jingoism expressed in these two lines of "Peace" is unmistakable. Combining unconventional texts and music with unconventional performance, the Plastics struck a chord…which disenchanted youth—the twenty-year-olds—who flocked to their concerts" (Long 10).

This is revealing of the state of the mind of the PPU, as well as of their appeal to the twenty-somethings who appreciated their message. However, one of the challenges to translating this message is how they are interpreted by the band itself. The lyrics are coarse and suggestive although the music they're tied to is surprisingly upbeat and jazzy, a point which ties back to the Jirous's comment that "the provocative tension created by the contrast between the crudeness of the lyrics and the beauty of the music is one of the

most powerful aspects of psychedelic music" (20). There is however, an undeniable metaphorical vulgarity posited that there is a similarity between "peace" and "toilet paper," thus insinuating a harsh and cynical outlook on the meaning of "peace" in a totalitarian state. Long's interpretation which reflects on the context of the PPU's artistic dimension, is replete with tragic ties to a grim past and a cautionary view of the human condition. This further suggests the argument that the PPU's lyrics, no matter how obscure, cannot be separated from the notion that there were political undertones in their lyrics:

> In communist Czechoslovakia…[l]yrics had to be more subtle if the band planned to stay out of prison, and singers had to be content with irony or, at most, ridicule and ambiguous sarcasm (Ramet 222).

Without diminishing this argument, it must also be noted that the PPU's comedic undertones should always be taken into consideration; the rhyming of the words "mír" and "hajzlpapír," for instance, may simply carry sarcastic implications. Their albums are often ironic, or flat out strange, and the crude references were part of the band's style and characteristic of the psychedelic rock—like Zappa's—that was popular at the time. However as much of the past is always present in Czech culture, the PPU are often remembered as an articulate voice about the absurdities of living. This therefore suggests that they were not necessarily making a subversive statement about living in Czechoslovakia during normalization, but merely demonstrating their eccentric inclination to describe life as they saw it at that time.

Album III: *Egon Bondy's Happy Heart's Club Banned*

The PPU's third album carried some of the abrasiveness from its preceding album, but

also took a far more progressive and intellectual approach with the inclusion of highly regarded philosopher, Egon Bondy (the pen name of Zbyněk Fišer). Bondy was a leader in the underground who "wrote some 60 books, most printed secretly and few published in the West. But his greatest fame came when the Czech underground band the Plastic People of the Universe used his morbidly funny poems as song lyrics."[27] The topics Bondy chose to write about, which the Czechoslovak government refused to print, were exactly what the PPU was looking for to enhance their lyrical repertoire:

> There is hardly a single taboo that is not overturned in Bondy's poetry; but this is never done as an end in itself or as a deliberate provocation: it merely a simple expression of the truth of life and the position of a man in the world (Jirous 18-19).

His left-wing, Marxist views didn't necessarily win the admiration of many Czechs, but did gain admiration within the creative subculture. Bondy was particularly helpful with the PPU's lyrical construction with "their irreverence toward socialist values, and their use of slang and mild profanity" and assisted in helping the band make "a name for themselves by setting literary texts of unconventional writers to music" (Long 9).

Bondy's influence was transformational for the band's stature as "[t]he final impulse that the Plastic People needed to become troubadours was an encounter with the work of the poet Egon Bondy….Bondy is a poet who deals with the most basic and profound aspects of man, from his dimensions as a social creature to his imperfect and very vulnerable private biological being" (Jirous 18). Though some might consider the lyrics of this album brash, all of which Bondy was responsible for writing, they are indicative of both the jaded nature of the times and the enduring black humor that was

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[27] Martin, Douglas. "Egon Bondy, 77, Dies: Czech Write and Critic." New York Times 17 April 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/15/books/15bondy.html?em&ex=1176868800&en=65a3c60c76055909&ei=5087%0A>. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

nurtured in the second culture. To this extent Bondy's contribution was indicated in the title of the band's third album as: *Egon Bondy's Happy Hearts Club Banned*, based on the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Ultimately, this was their most successful and controversial recording to date.

> By setting to music the work of a poet who was not allowed by the establishment to publish even a single poem, the Plastic People were clearly demonstrating that they were not interested in gaining a place in the official culture structure but far more in creating and acting as a medium for what they themselves consider culture (18-19).

According to Tony Mitchell in "Mixing Pop and Politics: Rock Music in Czechoslovakia," the song "Dvacet" or "'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" (Mitchell 197). The song was appealing to a particular generation who had only briefly witnessed a period of freedom in a communist state, as the lyrics illustrate cynicism and disappointment as they address the suffering of a nation through the 20th century:

> 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 Masarýk, the song implies, have long given up hope of alternatives to a Stalinist regime (197).

According to Michael Long, "*Komu je dnes dvacet*" is an example of a typical PPU song, yet it also seems to be one of the first songs of the period in which the band begins to realize its own mortality and becomes more reflective on the state of the country and their oppressed existence. It redeems and accepts the impetuousness of youth, the responsibility of adulthood, and the passiveness of later years when one needn't care about the world around them anymore—if only because of becoming senile.

The Twenty-year-old Today
Whoever is twenty today,
Feels like throwing up from disgust
But those in their forties
Want to puke even more.
Only the sixty-year-old
Can nurse schlerosis [sic] in bed.
But whoever is twenty today,
Only hurls with disgust
(Long 10)

Alongside Mitchell's 1992 translation, the lyrics are different—such as "repulsion" and "revulsion" and "easier" and "amnesia." While it's understood that these words may have been chosen to rhyme to in the translation, it's arguable that this could also distort the band's characteristic black humor:

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
(Mitchell 197)

It would seem that in either case, the lyrics are suggestive of a dismal perspective, as they were written by Bondy who was committed to "what he considered pure Marxism, his philosophical sophistication and his cultivated crassness, his anti-Americanism and his suspicions about his own government's motives" (Martin). Even so, the less-than-appealing visual elements these variations of lyrics carry a romantic and haunting essence to them with the repetitive correlation of age and illness. To some degree, it's sorrowful in its perception of life, yet the comparison of these two sets of lyrics is particularly interesting:

> [The] portraying 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 (Mitchell 190).

Incidentally, Mitchell also notes that in his cassette copy of this album, there is a handwritten accreditation for the PPU, which says:

> [The] lirics [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 (197).

Although the *Egon Bondy's Happy Hearts Club Banned* album was not released until 1975, the year prior had proven to be a major turning point for the PPU and their nonconformist lifestyle within a normalized society. Their ability to remain symbolic figures of apolitical thought was increasingly threatened by the Communist government when in March 1974 a PPU performance was planned under the pretense of a wedding in the city of České Budějovice. When hundreds of fans arrived, they quickly realized the police had found out and were subsequently "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. This would be called the "České Budějovice Massacre."[28] The significance of their third album may have given the band unprecedented attention in the underground, but the authority's persistence in preventing the PPU from succeeding was unstoppable.

The essence of the band, however, is not necessarily as somber as their music would indicate. In fact, their humor and mainstream influences had more to do with their ongoing work and optimism than one would expect. The current PPU bassist, Eva

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[28] Yanocik, Joseph. "The Plastic People of the Universe." *Perfect Sound Forever*. 30 November 2007. 7 February 2008 <http://www.furious.com/PERFECT/pulnoc.html>. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

Turnová, noted that: “most of the lyrics are based on puns” as would be the case with “Můchomurky bílé,” (“White Mushrooms”), a song that holds much sentimentality to the PPU’s audience.[29] The general notion is that this song is about a man who goes off into fields to collect white mushrooms and later dies; but, according to Turnová, he is merely in search of psychedelics. Turnová’s description of Hlavsa is that he was particularly “clever” when it comes to combining dark lyrics with popular music; she mentions the relatively unknown detail that “Kanárek,” a dire song on the PPU’s *Hovézí porážka* album (1983-1984), is based on the beat of David Bowie’s 1977 hit “Heroes.”

Looking at the PPU thirty years ago or today, regardless of whether one sees them as dissidents or artists, they are always musicians to the core. Related to this is their role in Czech history, which is essential to understanding the mark they would make in history, not as pariahs or dissidents, but as self-proclaimed “heretics and pagans” that are “inseparable allies” (Ascherson). In Tom Stoppard’s 2006 play, *Rock ‘n’ Roll*, the playwright notes in the dialogue: “Foreign journalists never mention the music…only about being symbols of foreign resistance.”[30] While the PPU may not have been destined to become one of the world’s most prominent rock bands, it is essential that they be remembered for what they represented; the introduction of experimental rock in Czechoslovakia and the redefinition of societal identity rooted in “normalcy.”

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[29] Interview with Eva Turnová, Prague, February 2008.

[30] Stoppard, Tom. *Rock ‘n’ Roll*. New York: Grove Press, 2006. 74. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

Chapter 3

The Trial

The Plastic People of the Universe have long claimed that their intent was purely aesthetic—an artistic exploration within the second culture, a unique sub-existence embodying a myriad of artistic and intellectual activities inside the Czech underground. The PPU were pacifists and, more important, didn't mind if their work was inconsequential: it was the act of not acting that made them distinct. Their conviction that they "had absolutely no political message" would shape their identity and sustain their claim that ambivalence towards the state might be beyond the reach of political repercussion.[31]

Given the harsh political climate in Czechoslovakia after the 1968 Soviet invasion, the PPU slowly became a significant representative of Czech culture. Once the Communist government refused to grant the band a license to perform legally, the band began to move into what Jirous called the "Second Culture." This essentially meant that the underground, like the government, was a state of mind – a coexistence that would not be part of the First Culture or, as Vaclav Benda called, a "Parallel Polis." Benda's essay explains the significance of a parallel structure emphasizing the morality and mission of the "Polis."

> So far, the Second Culture is the most developed and dynamic parallel structure. It should serve as a model for other areas and, at the same time, all available means must be deployed to support its development,

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[31] Berman, Paul. "The Lives They Lived: Milan Hlavsa, B. 1951; Prague Rock." New York Times. 30 December 2001. 10 December 2007 <http://query.nytimes .com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E05E2D61231F933A05751C1A9679C8B63>. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

> especially in neglected areas like literary criticism, cultural journalism, theatre and film (Benda 38).

Jirous, who was largely the catalyst for this thinking, posited the notion that “[T]he underground is created by people who have understood that within the bounds of legality nothing can be changed, and who no longer even attempt to function within those bounds” (30). This effectively describes the conditions under which the PPU would thrive.

Not only were the PPU viewed as authentic Czech rock artists for their refusal to conform to the Communist directives for rock and roll artists, but their music exemplified a unique style and original work that incorporated their own creative experimentation with musical styles (e.g., jazz/fusion/folk), influences from contemporary Czech pioneers of the underground (e.g., Egon Bondy), and themes common to the psychedelic rock scene (e.g., drugs), in addition to their own aesthetic experimentation with costumes, light shows, and clandestine performances. Jirous helped to incorporate many of these characteristics and “kept repeating…that the concept of ‘the underground’ is based on ‘conscious intellectual effort’ and on spiritual qualities in life” (Pilař). The PPU’s self-perception (or perhaps conceit) as founders of a movement based on free will and disengagement from the First Culture, gave them their justification for opting out of the politics of the state. While their awareness of this fact has been well documented, in 1976 they were to endure a trial that was perhaps their greatest irony.

The trial that would place the PPU at the forefront of a human rights agenda was bound to happen. The government had been aware of the PPU’s performances as, since the early 1970s, the PPU had been recording and distributing albums underground—some of which made it to the West. Word soon began to spread about the "Underground

University" happenings, such as Jirous teaching a “course” on Andy Warhol and illustrating his presentation with a special guest performance by the PPU. Additionally, there were several particularly violent encounters between the band, its fans and the StB (Czechoslovak State Security) between 1974 and 1976. As the band could not play openly, they would host discreet parties and events, sometimes under the guise of a wedding where they, occasionally, also performed.

In spite of this violence resulting from the České Budějovice Massacre in March of 1974, Jirous decided to hold another performance on Sept 1, 1974 that would mark the First Music Festival of the Second Culture. As a way of keeping the festival quiet from the government, it was called “Hannibal’s Wedding” which would serve as the façade for the performance in the town of Postupice in southeastern Czechoslovakia. Although the festival was designed to be a celebration of the underground music scene and a triumph of secret planning on the part of Jirous and other members of the underground, the devastating events of the March concert would haunt them as word had reached the secret police. Officers appeared and began to brutally interrogate the crowd. As a result, the band’s performances during 1975 dwindled and were carefully kept under the radar with private performances. This, however, is when they began working on their third album, and one of their most popular recordings: *Egon Bondy’s Happy Heart’s Club Banned*.

It was a snowy day on January 21, 1976 when the band traveled out into the Southern Bohemian countryside to perform at the Second Festival of the Second Culture, this time known as "Magor's Wedding," in the small town of Bojanovice. The band successfully performed the show without incident, yet, as Paul Wilson, former lead singer of the band recalls, this was a rare occurrence: “Against all our expectations, the festival

had not been raided by the police, and the triumph was still warming us, encouraging our hopes. Now the hunt was on again. The hopeful calm of the past two months had been nothing more than the eye of a hurricane" (Wilson 39-40). On March 17, 1976 the secret police crashed another PPU concert resulting in numerous arrests and interrogations. For the communist government, this was the final straw:

> 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. The consequences of the January 1976 show, however, would not arrive until March of that year when police raided and ransacked the homes of several PPU members (Yanocik).

As a result, four members of the PPU, including Jirous; Josef Janiček, the PPU's keyboardist; Vratislav Brabenec, saxophonist; and Svatopluk Karásek, a friend of the band, were imprisoned and placed on trial on September 21, 1976: "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" (Yanocik). Two days later, all of the men "were found guilty of 'organized disturbance of the peace'. Jirous was sentenced to 18 months, Josef Janiček to 12 months, and both Karásek and Brabenec to 8 months in Prague's Ruzyně Prison" (Yanocik). The event caught the country's attention, with many coming forth to rally on the band's behalf:

> A diverse group of supporters, including playwrights, writers, professors and other Czech intellectuals, had attended the trial and gathered outside in the hallway…In the months that followed, these sympathizers gathered in solidarity with the hippies and rallied around the Plastic People. (Yanocik).

Vaclav Havel, a prominent playwright at the time, was particularly frustrated by the incident, resulting in his sudden transition from his artistic role in the community to become an impassioned commentator on the state of the country since the end of the Prague Spring. In his 1978 essay "The Power of the Powerless," Havel would address the idea that with the 1968 invasion came the condemnation of allowing people to live within their own truth, a concept which was very much a part of the PPU's convictions. Havel illustrated the atrocious quality of life in Warsaw Pact states since August 1968, and the desperate need to bring attention to the crumbling spirit of Czechs:

> [S]omewhere at the beginning of this drama, there were individuals who were willing to live within the truth, even when things were at their worst. These people had no real access to power, nor did they aspire to it. The sphere in which they were living the truth was not necessarily even that of political thought. They could equally have been poets, painters, musicians, or simple ordinary citizens who were able to maintain their human dignity (Havel 151).

Ultimately, the effects of the trial would prove groundbreaking and, although not immediately, it would put members of the underground at the center of the scene. It also ultimately became an opportunity to pointedly challenge the government on the basis of its unnecessarily harsh treatment of individuals.

An appreciation of the PPU's apolitical stance requires an acceptance of their personal reality as well as, perhaps, a leap of faith. Based on extensive interviews and commentary, it is clear that the individual intentions of the PPU were void of political intent—however, it is unlikely that, given the circumstances, the PPU's actions could not have suffered a political backlash. Their refusal to conform to the government's mandates for rock music—whether it meant cutting their hair shorter, changing their name or playing music with Czech lyrics only—was precisely what set them apart. Yet

their insistence on being ambivalent towards the establishment was in and of itself to be deemed a political motive, as it was nearly impossible to escape all together: "In a totalitarian political structure, just about every facet of human existence is politicized."[32]

The trial's high profile, therefore, brought attention and was a mixed blessing for the PPU. During the trial, the band's name appeared with increasing frequency in Western news reports. The coverage of the band's music was distributed in AP dispatches between 1976 and 1982 and described the harsh sentencing. Few details were offered other than the communist presence in Czechoslovakia. This, of course, was not the case for all newspapers—in fact several media outlets delved further to reveal and introduce the band to Western audiences. According to one 1976 Los Angeles Times article, they were initially described as apolitical soldiers:

> [T]he most prominent and most innovative rock group in what, consciously and programmatically, became a musical and cultural underground. The group's members rejected all of what passed for culture officially, and in turn were themselves rejected by the establishment.[33]

However, in keeping with the Western assessment that the band's struggle was essentially political, this same article incorporates two contrary theories about the PPU's performances, noting that the "atmosphere at these performances was suffused not just with music and celebration; as a participant recently put it, there was a distinct feeling of affinity with early Protestants gathering at their secret meetings in that rebellious Bohemian land." The same author suggests that in "a totalitarian country, a musical and cultural underground amounts to a political underground, too" (Kovanda). The band,

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[32] Battěk, Rudolf. "Spiritual Values, Independent Initiatives and Politics." The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-eastern Europe. London: Hutchinson, 1985. 104. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text).

[33] Kovanda, Karel. "Czech Artists Thirst in a Cultural Desert: Film Makers, Writers, Even Rock Musicians Feel Hot Breath of Officialdom." Los Angeles Times 1 October 1976: C7. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

therefore, was receiving attention for their music, but not necessarily for the music's sake. It is arguable then that the politicization of the trial is a reflection of the Western viewpoint at the time. In effect, the fame that PPU had once hoped for occurred as a result their adversity, not their talent as musicians. Other newspapers followed with similar political attachments: "They were among 30 Czechoslovak rock musicians arrested after a wedding last April. All were performers in officially unrecognized but popular rock groups specializing in a subtle form of protest singing."[34]

By 1978 some of America's underground scene started to embrace the PPU's cause, such as the music and dance scene in New York City, for instance (Anderson). More widespread acknowledgement came once human rights organizations like Amnesty International began hosting events such as "The Night of Empty Chairs" as an opportunity for well-known artists to "serve as a forum for those whose thoughts have been either silenced or suppressed."[35] The purpose of this event was a veritable representation of the PPU's cause (and would include a recitation of the lyrics "100 Bodů"—"100 Percent"—by singer-icon of the time, Patti Smith) and the title of the article suggests a political connection in understanding of the PPU's circumstances: "Dissidents' Voices in 'Empty Chairs.'" The same argument stands in the case of an article that reports on the band's efforts to perform as part of a purported "campaign":

> The regime's fear of non-conformity and Western influence can most readily be seen in its suppression of rock music. The campaign began in the early Seventies, when such groups as Plastic People of the Universe and Artificial Matter made their appearances.[36]

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[34] Browne, Malcolm W. "Soviet Bloc Acts To Curb 'Plague' of Alien Styles." New York Times 12 December 1976: 6.
[35] Brown, James. "Dissidents' Voices in 'Empty Chairs.'" Los Angeles Times 18 July 1978: H12.
[36] Spivak, Jonathan. "In Stalinist Prague There Is No Sign of Spring." Wall Street Journal 30 April 1992: 31.

The inevitable politicization of the PPU's work is revealed in post-Soviet bloc reports as well, although not necessarily as an immediate result of the PPU's actions. The political essence of the band could not be avoided:

> [W]hen they [PPU] got persecuted, prosecuted against and harassed, they started to voice unequivocal political messages. For instance in the song "A Hundred [Percent]," having enumerated all the things the Communist establishment was afraid of, they ended up with an exclamation: 'Then why should we be afraid of THEM?'[37]

Although the PPU were not necessarily the pioneers of the Czech rock movement, their genre had long been one to provoke conflict under the Communist government, and whether or not they intended to be political, everything that defined them as musicians implied otherwise:

> Spectacular subcultures express forbidden contents (consciousness of class, consciousness of difference) in forbidden forms (transgressions of sartorial and behavourial codes, law breaking, etc.). They are profane articulations, and they are often and significantly defined as "unnatural"...."[38]

Hebdige's description is exemplary of the idea that, "in a totalitarian society, any activity which does not conform to established rules is regarded by that society as oppositional."[39] To the government, "forbidden," "profane," and "unnatural" characteristics were a demonstration of insubordination and dissidence and, as a result, the PPU would have to face the consequences.

Another external contributor to the politicization of the band was one of their greatest defenders: Havel. Upon learning about the circumstances of the trial, Havel saw

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[37] Pospíšil, Tomáš. "Making Music as a Political Act: Or How the Velvet Underground Influenced the Velvet Revolution." 27 July 2006 <http://angam.ang.univie.ac.at/EAASworkshop /posppres.htm>.
[38] Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style. London: Routledge, 1981. 91-92.
[39] Day, Barbara. The Velvet Philosophers. London: Claridge Press, 1999. 8.

the dilemma of the band as "controversy over the meaning of human life" and in that same year wrote a brief essay entitled: "The Trial."[40] This would be an opportunity for him to demonstrate the intrusiveness of the government and serve as a basis for many of his essays in years to follow. Havel's many essays regarding the underground, as well as his perceptions of the "dissident" movement, would attract international attention and provide inspiration for the counter-cultural movement. As a result, his 1990 election to the presidency of Czechoslovakia was attributed—at least in part—to his earlier support of the PPU. While Havel's essays may have intended to shed light on the intensely restrictive conditions under which Czechoslovakians lived, they would draw particular attention to the plight of the PPU who would, consequentially, be tagged with the misnomer of political oppositionists—precisely what the band had no intention of being.

Havel also played an important role in the completion of "Charter 77" which was completed January 1, 1977. This upheld the pro-human rights argument entirely and took the political essence of the PPU to the next stage. The Charter itself was essentially a contract inspired by the Human Rights Accords in Helsinki, Finland in 1975. It was signed by many leading intellectuals of the underground and many, although not all, of the signers argued that the trial of the PPU was a provocation, including Benda: "Charter 77, which grew out of actions taken to defend parallel structures that already existed (the Second Culture) devotes much of its efforts to 'humanising' existing official structures…by reinterpreting their meaning" (Benda 37). Thanks to Havel and his resultant close friendship with the PPU, Charter 77 would be acknowledged as having been inspired by the PPU's situation. In his 1978 essay, "The Power of the Powerless,"

[40] Havel, Vaclav. "The Trial." Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990. Ed. Paul Wilson. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991. 106.

Havel states about Charter 77: "As an existential solution, it takes individuals back to the solid ground of their own identity…this conclusion can be reached only by someone who is unwilling to sacrifice his or her own human identity to politics, or rather who does not believe in a politics that requires such a sacrifice" (152). His ongoing defense of the PPU inadvertently became attributed to the Charter which "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."[41]

Subsequently, in April 1978, VONS (Výbor na obranu nespravedlivě stíhaných), or Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Persecuted, was another political strike organized to support those involved with Charter 77. Generally advocates of human rights find it hard to dodge political consequences, for invariably they must provoke to succeed and engage in "breaching the peace" (Dobbs). While Havel may have been attempting to persuade Husák's government to pardon the PPU or reduce their punishment, or perhaps at least acknowledge the band's anti-violent, artistic identity, he could not get the political charge diminished. "The Trial," written just after and as tribute to the case of the PPU, garnered much additional tension for its pro-human rights defense of their situation and how it related to the ongoing struggle for Czechoslovakians. This idea is addressed in "The Power of the Powerless" when Havel explores the theory of what it means to "live within the truth":

> In the post-totalitarian system…living within the truth has more than a mere existential dimension (returning humanity to its inherent nature), or noetic dimension (revealing reality as it is), or a moral dimension (setting an example for others). It also has an unambiguous *political* dimension. If the main pillar of the system is living a lie, then it is not surprising that the fundamental threat to it is living the truth (148).

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[41] "Havel Time Line." Columbia University. 30 October 2006. 19 August 2007 <havel.columbia.edu/timeline.html>.

Havel suggests that such was the case of the PPU and ultimately calls on citizens to acknowledge their views and what it means to refute Communist decrees. Additionally, he addresses the ideological motivations of the establishment and how Czechs living in a "post-totalitarian" system are being denied basic human freedoms. At the same time, this Czech existence acknowledges political repercussions; the same political repercussions the PPU were subjected to:

> If suppression of the aims of life is a complex process, and if it is based on the multifaceted manipulation of all expressions of life then, by the same token, every free expression of life indirectly threatens the post-totalitarian system politically, including forms of expression to which, in other social systems, no one would attribute any potential political significance, not to mention explosive power (151).

With the tensions of the Cold War present between the East and West, Havel's rising fame, and increasing international press reports, the coverage would suggest the acts of the PPU, by association, were political. The international coverage of the PPU was surely a startling glimpse into a government on the verge of total dysfunction, and yet the PPU's ambivalence also began to appear somewhat naïve in light of the Communist government's well-known decrees. The unlikely possibility that the PPU could avoid their fate as contributors to the increasing political tension became clearer:

> Discussions about what comprises politics remain vague as long as they do not take into consideration the politicization of "non-political" spheres and "non-political" behavior. In a totalitarian system, every kind of behaviour is "political" because the ruling power judges every attitude, every accomplishment according to how it serves and supports its own position (Battěk 105).

Jirous, a firm defender of the PPU's statements, has himself made a number of contradictions regarding their apolitical stance. His acknowledgement of struggle under the regime in his "Report on the Third Czech Music Revival," for instance, notes that

“[the second culture] is the declaration of a struggle against the establishment...” (30). Additionally, in response to an affiliate’s calling the underground an “attack on culture,” Jirous claims that:

> [T]his attack can be carried out only by people who stand outside that culture. Briefly put, the underground is the activity of artists and intellectuals whose work is unacceptable to the establishment and who, in this state of unacceptability, do not remain passive, but attempt through their work to destroy the establishment. Two absolutely necessary characteristics of those who have chosen the underground as their spiritual home are rage and humility (30).

Yet only a few paragraphs later he states, “The aim of the underground here in Bohemia is the creation of a second culture: …a culture which cannot have the destruction of the establishment as its aim because in doing so, it would drive itself into the establishment’s embrace” (30). Essentially, in stating ambivalence and maintaining a mentality free from the restrictions of the regime, there is a contradiction in his mission to “destroy the establishment” through their work. This is essentially why the hope to remain apolitical was not to be easily accepted.

During the band’s formation in late 1968, the PPU utilized this time for their free floating, experimental, wild, delayed adolescence. Their stated dream was to play rock music like their Western idols – to become famous, or at least become a powerful addition to the psychedelic music genre of the time. According to Hlavsa:

> Some of us went to work in forestry to earn new gear [instruments], which we built ourselves…But these things didn't affect our music at all. We never resorted to vent our frustration in our songs and decry the regime which used this indirect way to crush us underfoot. For several years we played not in the underground but as an amateur group under the franchise of various associations (soccer clubs, voluntary firemen), which sponsored a concert every now and then. We weren't forced underground until 1976, when the memorable trial was staged against the band and our friends (Unterberger).

In many ways, their self perceived legacy was real enough for a short period of time (1968-76) for, in the end, the results of the 1976 trial would only serve to define them as creators of an internationally recognized political brouhaha. At the same time however, the PPU's persistence, their eccentric artistic talent, and their brazen will to perform under a totalitarian regime would, to some extent, be remembered as part of the unique cultural distinction and intellectual significance that embodies Central Europe's identity:

> [Central Europe] was fully justified in rereading and presenting to the world the cultural heritage of this region of borderlands – where nations, religions, and cultures rub up against one another. They were fully justified in presenting it as the realization of a multicultural ideal of society – a miniature Europe of Nations – founded on the principle of maximum diversity in minimum space. These writers also had a wise idea concerning spiritual-political strategy: these nations, strikingly weak and powerless in confronting the imperial appetites of their neighbors, are transforming this powerlessness into power. Here we have a land of small nations, conquered, subjected, and enslaved for generations, transforming itself into the fertile soil… (Michnik 318).

This was particularly so as Havel became enmeshed in their politicization. It is arguable, regardless of intent, that the PPU had a hand in promoting Havel's platform and his exposé of the injustices of the establishment. Earned or unearned, desired or denied, credit for the collapse of the communist state was given to the PPU. Still, Jirous had affirmed that they did not fight for a change in the establishment, as that would be akin to acknowledging it (31). Although Havel denies free-thinking warrants a "dissident" title, his writings show that by setting oneself apart to "live within the truth," the PPU—and Czechs in general—would also have to live with the political repercussions.

The semantics often attached to the PPU's actions are a critical facet of this art vs. politics debate. Whereas the PPU were comfortable as nonconformists, they were deemed "dissidents." This is quite evident today, as in music reviews and historical summaries

they are consistently cited as dissidents. The band's classification as opponents of the regime poses the need for a critical evaluation of the labels applied to them; these include "rebels," and "dissidents," all of which the PPU rejected. Still, the lack of clarity inherent in these terms poses a consistent problem in how the PPU's apolitical perception of self and the historic memory of their dissident behavior are reconciled.

Looking at what precedes the PPU's movement into the underground, in addition to the content of the music produced beginning in 1968, it is vital to examine to what extent the PPU's non-political dissident nature was a shared Czech experience and one with political consequences. The threat the PPU posed in the creation of the second culture and the implications of their drift into the underground inevitably had to become political, as they were a catalyst for the progressive deconstruction of Communist ideology (Pekacz 43). Being nonconformist created a powerful quandary for the Czech citizenry, and reflects the inner conflicts of identity the PPU struggled with, whether or not they consciously acknowledged it. This impasse is similar to the circumstances faced in other Central European underground movements including Poland's Solidarity movement:

> Decades and centuries of existence in an environment of oppression and repression produced a specific culture, characterized by honor and self-irony, the stubbornness to stand by values, and the courage to believe in romantic ideals. Here, national and civic consciousness developed as a result of human bonds – and not by the order of state institutions; here, it was easier to devise the idea of civil society, precisely because the sovereign national state remained largely in the realm of dreams. The great cultural diversity of this region was to be – and frequently was – the best weapon of self-defense against the claims of ethnic or ideological powers (Michnik 318).

The historic record demonstrates the significance of the PPU not only in contributing to a flourishing, intellectual underground community, but also in finding and reviving a new

kind of Czech culture: an identity developed from the painful presence and past of Communist rule, and one that would ultimately celebrate the survival of the human spirit, regardless of political consequences.

Chapter 4

Legacy of the PPU

Perhaps the greatest irony to the story of the Plastic People of the Universe is how hindsight may give greater political and social significance to their societal arc than they should receive credit for—and which they would deny anyway. To themselves, the PPU were a group committed to free artistic expression beyond the control of the state—independent, if only in their minds, from the government. They believed that the state might control the common man and his political actions, but that art was a separate realm beyond the arm of control. Were the PPU, therefore, just hopelessly naïve, blithely unaware of the consequences of their thinking? Or were they savvy artists and intellectuals testing how far they could go in tweaking the Communist presence? It would be disingenuous to write that the PPU did not contribute to the changing political landscape of the former Czechoslovakia, for it was their belief in a "parallel polis" of moral integrity that posed a challenge to the unrelenting influence of the state. The evidence has shown that the struggles the PPU represented in this study are not just the classic dichotomy of art vs. politics, but a matter of how they sought fundamental human freedoms. They wished to be free from being classified as dissenters, yet they were unwilling to give in to the normalization process. There is considerable validity to this point in the sense that the traditional art vs. politics argument is that art should be unfettered and free to consciously offend or criticize. This is not the case with the PPU, who were, in their minds, just doing their own thing. Indeed, given the sybaritic and

hedonistic inclinations often associated with rock musicians, it's hard to accept the view that they were ever a serious threat to the state. Yet, it is of course a bit of a conundrum for a band that always claimed it was apolitical to be credited with having one of the most powerful hands in the collapse of Communist power:

> …although the belief in rock's significant role in the process leading to the collapse of Communism is incomprehensible on intellectual grounds, its self-serving aspects are obvious (Pekacz 48).

As Pekacz implies, the world of rock is no stranger to delusion. Still celebrity and ego are powerful forces. It would be hard to deny that the PPU were not part of a surging collective ethos that forced the Communist hand.

This thesis has explored the key issues that contributed to the PPU's status from the period just before and after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia and the resulting drift of the PPU into the underground as a result of their inability to be registered under the Communist government in 1970. It was after this time, when the band went underground, that they began to stray from their initial youthful and naïve creativity on *Muž bez uší*, and embarked on a creative evolution that led to albums such as *Egon Bondy's Happy Hearts Club Banned*, which shows an edgier, philosophical troupe had been created—one that became intrigued by a thriving, dissident underground culture which had an impact on contemporary theoretical and abstract notions of consciousness and art. Although "[r]ock was not inherently anti-Communist (neither were rock musicians inherently anti-Communists);…rock 'revolt' was not against the dominant culture, but *within* it" (Pekacz 48). The PPU are a reflection of this theory, illustrating the point that, while their lyrics and musical innovation established the band's

distinctive rock ‘n’ roll persona, their ambivalence towards the state would inevitably be perceived as being *against* the regime.

The 1976 trial of the PPU was also of great consequence for the band beyond the imprisonment of three of its members. This event invited a slew of international media attention drawing support from human right organizations in the West which deemed the band as victims of Communism's political and cultural repression and, in turn, attracted political controversy. In Czechoslovakia, Havel assisted in gathering support for the band, effectively making the PPU’s trial a catalyst to address the oppressive climate of the country. Havel’s outspoken support demonstrated in his candid coverage of the PPU’s case “The Trial,” and his friendship with the band, drew much attention from Western media. This interaction would influence Czech cultural and social perceptions of the band as it tied into the political agenda that Havel sought to formulate. For example, the trial of the PPU was:

> [A]n impassioned debate about the meaning of human existence, an urgent questioning of what one should expect from life, whether one should silently accept the world as it is presented to one and slip obediently into one’s prearranged place in it, or whether one has the strength to exercise free choice in the matter; whether one should be ‘reasonable’ and take one’s place in the world, or whether one has the right to resist in the name of one’s own human convictions (105).

As a result, the band emerged as an emblematic victim of the unforgiving forces of the Communist government and became a leading example of how the establishment prevented people from being creative and thinking freely. Simultaneously, their story was slowly separated from their artistic principles, to simply to absorb and create music.

> What did Ivan Jirous and his friends in the dock wish to be? Certainly not heroes…I doubt they had any other aim in mind than persuading the court of their innocence and defending their right to compose and sing the songs they wanted. But what did they ultimately become? The unintentional

> personification of those forces in man that compel him to search for himself, to determine his own place in the world freely, and in his own way, not to make deals with his heart and not to cheat his conscience, to call things by their true names and to penetrate… "to the deeper level of being," and to do so at one's own risk, aware that at any time one may come up against the disfavor of the "master," the incomprehension of the dull-witted, or their own limitations (104).

The period following the trial did little to abate the growing perception that the PPU was a thorn in the side of the Communist state, as it "knew…where the greatest danger to it lay: in the realm of the intellect and the spirit. It knew…despite all the bribes and prizes and titles thrown their way, the artists were among the first to rebel."[42] In a recent documentary about the PPU, Brabenec acknowledges this, claiming, "We were more of a threat to the State than isolated groups of intellectuals because there were just a few of them and they wanted to write books. Whereas we had thousands of supporters all over the place, from Košice to Aš" (PPU Video, 3:03 end). Havel's agenda—no matter how influential—should not be confused with his real intention: to call the state on its ruthless oppression and activities against the underground.

Given their claim of solely wanting to practice art for arts' sake, one of the most daunting matters regarding the PPU's story is how to assess whether articles covering the group are more interested in their music or their rebellion. Did Western journalists foster the notion that they were political idealists and create a self fulfilling prophesy? Or did the sheer power of international pop culture—ignoring the fact that their work was in Czech and out of the mainstream—secure for them a unique, iconic status as free spirited musicians? The probability, especially given the fact that the group's existence was far better known among rights activists than rock enthusiasts, makes a strong case for politics

[42] Havel, Vaclav. ""Politics, Morality, and Civility." Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990. Ed. Paul Wilson. New York: Random House, 1991. 13.

trumping art: "The Plastics' dark, low-fi music is far better known to human-rights groups than to rock fans" (Pareles, "Rock 'n' Revolution"). This truly is the twist given their Western musical influences and persistence, their uniqueness and the openness to obscure, experimental genres at the time, like those of their idols—Frank Zappa and The Velvet Underground. Yet the external implications of their actions have ultimately affected how they will be remembered—as apolitical characters who contributed to the reshaping of the political scheme in Czechoslovakia, albeit unintentionally.

The PPU have since become an example of how apolitical actions can still be a catalyst with political repercussions. Although their efforts may have been virtuous, each song they wrote, each show they performed, and each album they produced, seemingly became a symbol of rebellion in a country bearing the weight of normalization. With this history behind them, the present day perception and current coverage of the band shows that they will likely continue to be perceived as a group of artists that wanted freedom, and not the eccentric, crafty, ambivalent group of teens that already believed their minds were free.

The PPU's story has recently gained attention as a result of press coverage and generally favorable reviews of Tom Stoppard's play *Rock 'n' Roll,* which has appeared in London, New York City and at Prague's Národní Divadlo (National Theater), where the band has performed live as a regular part of the show. The play specifically highlights the struggle of the PPU as a parallel to exploring the disintegration of communism by examining the mental demise of Pink Floyd's lead singer, Syd Barrett, and the incorporation of rock-n-roll music is less a highlight of the band's authentic music of the time as it is a demonstration of protest and the consequences. While Stoppard is

supportive of the band's apolitical approach, it is unlikely that the success of the play has as much to do with the discovery of the PPU's music and their apolitical stance as it does with the glorification of their story.

> It's a story not of activism but of whimsy treated as sedition, stubbornness met by brutality and a regime unknowingly consolidating its opposition. Repression amplified the band's impact, though at serious personal cost to the musicians.[43]

Perhaps Pareles is a little too succinct and reductive in his view of Stoppard's work. But, his sense of the PPU's inability to recognize why "whimsy" was threatening, and his understanding that the oafish, heavy handed response of the state only raised the group's profile, do get to the central factors that were to define the band's role in the collapse of the Communist state.

Although the history of the PPU is unique due to their persistent intent to remain separate from the world of politics, it would be fair to argue that, in the end, their decision to continue performing against the demands of the Communist government was a contributing force to the political movement that followed. While "[r]ock music has presented probably the most widespread vehicle of youth rebellion, resistance and independence behind the Iron Curtain," this acknowledges that politics and rock are inevitably intertwined in the context of Communism and Czechoslovakia's normalization (Mitchell 187). It's a unique circumstance, in that it is likely that their ambivalence was very much a part of the band's charisma, but current memory, as in the case of Stoppard's play, is truly about their victory as victims.

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[43] (Pareles, Jon. "Rock 'n' Revolution." New York Times 11 November 2007. 12 November 2007 <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/ 11/ 11/arts/music/11pare.html?n=Top/Reference/Times%20Topics/People/S/Stoppard,%20Tom>. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text).

> Rock music is an organic inseparable part of the sociocultural consciousness and activity of a society. Rock music, therefore, both reflects *and* contributes to the ideas of the age and the changes taking place in consciousness and behavior. In the context of Eastern Europe more specifically, rock music played a role in reinforcing the steady growth in the demand for freedom and in providing outlets through which alternative political ideas could be expressed and nurtured (Ramet 212).

As a result of the PPU's role in Czechoslovakia's history, their aspiration to receive due credit for their talent as musicians, as opposed to the political attention brought to them in the 1970s, would be an unlikely prospect. In 1988, after nearly 20 years, the PPU broke up largely over creative conflicts. Not long after, Hlavsa began a new music project with Josef Janiček and Jiři Kabeš called Půlnoc (Midnight). To the group's disappointment, what they saw as an innovative, contemporary musical work could not escape the legacy of the PPU. In a *Rolling Stone* review of their 1991 album, *City of Hysteria*, David Fricke doesn't seem to allow the recording to separate itself from the memory of the human rights' struggle in Czechoslovakia. His comments appear to be a nod—again—to the idea that the band "spoke out" as "underground heroes" during the Communist reign, but are not necessarily a review on the basis of artistic merit. He refers to the band's most popular song on their previous 1989 album, "It's Dangerous," as "a thundering tableau of rage and self-doubt, reflecting life under rule-by-paranoia" and goes on to address the latest album in light of the band's political struggles: "*City of Hysteria*'s somber propulsion, *Ragged Glory*-meets-*Goo* guitars and vocal anguish also bear eloquent testimony to the Czech people's prolonged suffering and fighting spirit" (Fricke). It may in fact just not be possible for the PPU members to ever escape the complexities and contradictions of their history. Yet the PPU's gestalt and what the rock movement really meant to its members was evident through the performances of Půlnoc as well:

> The music consisted of sardonic vocals on top of jeering, bass-driven rhythms, often as not on a single chord, with a guitar, saxophone and viola screaming hysteria overhead. But this sound matched the human rights argument perfectly. It was the sound of personal honesty, stripped of every adornment, without sentimentality, without posturing, without falsity (Berman).

Today's Czech Republic is a thriving scene for musical experimentation in punk, gypsy, indie rock, and contemporary pop—a place where Western artists pepper the popular clubs, restaurants and shops. The bucolic fields outside of Prague, where the PPU would once perform for weddings, now host popular European summer festivals where people from around the world go to hear an international lineup of music genres. Yet as desirable as this new freedom and openness may seem for a band that became famous through conflict and persecution, it seems unlikely that the PPU would have wanted to partake in mainstream stardom or celebrity salutes:

> I've never considered the underground to be a musical movement. That's simply not what the underground is. When we started up the band in the 60s, we considered ourselves to be an underground band in the sense that we did not aspire to become radio or media stars. We simply did what we wanted to do, and that's what the underground means to me (Hlavsa, PPU DVD, end 3:45).

The current PPU includes only three of the original members of the band: Brabenec, Kabeš and Janiček; and new members, Ivan Bierhanzl, Joe Karafiát, Ludvík Kandl and Eva Turnová, have joined within the last two decades and add a dash of youthfulness to the ageing, albeit lively, lead members. Nowadays the band tends to perform at humanitarian concerts worldwide, though they continue to book solo performances at small venues throughout Europe and the US. Having produced 11 albums since 1968 (not including live recordings), their set lists draw largely on their classics—songs that most attendees would recognize, although not many sing along. The original members,

now in their mid-60s, continue to perform with an impressive gusto for their craft, and there often appears to be am homage in each performance in memory of Hlavsa, who passed away in 2000.

In a recently released DVD about the PPU, there is footage that includes commentary from several members in the 1990s and their predictions about the future, much of which appears to be hopeful; they want to continue a life as musicians merely for the love of music. Honza Brabec sentimentally notes: "I think the band should carry on. Maybe it should soak up some of what's been going on since the old days, whether it's determined by the overall story or even by the fact that we're not getting any younger" (PPU DVD, end 7:08) while Brabenec rejects any concerns about ageing and even suggests that the future of the PPU's music could be their most inspired yet:

> I'd like to carry on, in a different way and direction to take a little step…I'd like to do something a little more free, wilder. As you get older, you seek wilder forms of expression (PPU DVD, 7:10).

So will the PPU rock-on into their dotage, or accept their role in history as the "unasked-for political martyrdom [which] inspired the movement that somehow peacefully took over their Government?"[44] It seems possible. And what appears to remain constant is their persona as a motley crew of musicians who celebrated and contributed to authentic and individual creativity: "We don't do the music just for the sake of music. You must be the author of your own life" (Pareles, "Milan Hlavsa"). In this sense it's difficult to know if Hlavsa is suggesting that just listening to the music is no longer enough and that one might have to accommodate one's talents to social and political realities. Would Hlavsa then be suggesting that the political is an alternative to the aesthetic? It's doubtful, although perhaps he's alluding to a touch of pragmatism. No matter. In the end, perhaps

[44] Allred, Don. "Uprostřed." The Village Voice 2 March 1999, Vol. 44, Issue 8: 73?

what is most significant about the odyssey of the PPU, is that they show us that we command the pen that writes the script of our lives—that we are indeed the “author” of our own destiny. That’s quite an encore.

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