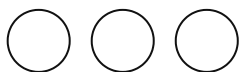


Plastic People Power / Czech band that helped spawn revolution comes to San Francisco

Dan Ouellette

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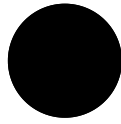


Thirty years ago a group of young Czechoslovakian musicians formed a rock band. An innocent act by American standards, it was profoundly subversive in a country held hostage by the Soviet Union.

Named after a [Frank Zappa](#) tune they smuggled behind the Iron Curtain, the Plastic People of the Universe proved to be much more than a bunch of upstarts out for a rowdy time. With their propulsive beat and dour- comic-sardonic lyrics, the group not only became a provocateur but, ultimately, a catalyst for the Czech revolution.

"Yes, we're still very famous back in Czechoslovakia," says Plastic People alto saxophonist [Vratislav Brabenec](#) by telephone from New York City. The band's first-ever U.S. tour stops at San Francisco's Bottom of the Hill this Friday. "The band continues to be seen as a symbol of the fight against communist oppression."

Speaking with a heavy accent, Brabenec says he sometimes feels as if the band's role in the fight against Soviet oppression has been overblown. After all, the tunes themselves weren't blatant calls to revolution.



But the Plastics vigorously bucked the status quo by delivering thought-provoking lyrics wrapped in power-packed rock. Brabenec notes that the band's biggest contribution to the uprising was its refusal to make concessions.

"We did not compromise, which was rare at that time," he says. "It really is a miracle that we survived. The Communists did not like us. They wanted us to emigrate, but we held out.

"That's why today it's very important for a lot of young people that the Plastic People exist."

RESPONSE TO SOVIET TANKS

In 1968 in the United States, rock 'n' roll provided the soundtrack for the protest against the Vietnam War. In Czechoslovakia, music became a response to Soviet tanks rolling through the streets of Prague -- the outward sign of sociopolitical clampdown.

Born a few months after the invasion, the Plastic People started out as a cover band, drawing material from the Doors, the Fugs and the Velvet Underground. They gradually integrated their own material into the psychedelic mix, inspired by the likes of Captain Beefheart and Zappa's Mothers of Invention.

"We were playing music that was influenced by the feeling of freedom that was in the air at the time," Brabenec says. "It was the same everywhere, but because of the

Communists we had a harder time expressing it."

In 1973, the Czech government revoked the Plastic People's license to perform, which forced the band underground. It played unannounced concerts in abandoned buildings and countryside venues and in 1974 secretly recorded its first album.

Titled "Egon Bondy's Happy Hearts Club Banned" in an obvious allusion to the Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper," it was a hard-driving collection of crass poems about such topics as constipation and toxic chemicals.

Two years later, the secret police raided one of the group's concerts and arrested the band for "organized disturbance of the peace."

The raid sparked a response by Czech dissidents, including future President Vaclav Havel, who published the human rights manifesto Charter 77 (which paved the way for the Velvet Revolution in 1989).

After a public trial, the band's manager and artistic director Ivan Jirous and Brabenec were jailed -- the former for nine years, the latter for eight months.

"I still don't know why I was the only musician in the band to be imprisoned," Brabenec says. "One of the theories is that they singled out people who had a university education and were considered intellectuals."

The Plastic People kept performing and recording secretly, and the government continued to harass the band. A landscape architect by profession, Brabenec couldn't find work after he was released from jail and eventually was forced to move to Canada in 1982.

The rest of the band finally called it quits in 1987, with three members forming the post-punk groove group Pulnoc. The Plastics didn't re-form until January 1997, when at the

request of President Havel they played at the Czech Republic's 20th anniversary celebration of Charter 77.

Pleased by the response, the band began to perform sporadically, playing concerts in Slovakia and the Czech Republic and last July staging a show in New York.

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The most recent Plastics recording is "1997," a live show performed in Prague and released on the Globus International imprint. Available here as an import, the CD captures the band playing its old material from the 1970s and '80s.

The tunes are hard-edged, crunching rockers with a metallic throb and pile-driving beat. The numbers are also characterized by a jamming vibe, with young guitarist Joe Kararfiat (a new Plastic member) serving up funky, fiery psychedelic riffs and Brabenec soaring into free-jazz saxophone excursions.

"Even though we're playing old songs, this is not a Plastic People revival," Brabenec says of the tour, which is sponsored by Tamizdat, a New York-based nonprofit organization fostering relationships between U.S. and Eastern European musicians.

"We're not interested in copying what we did before. We're revisiting the songs with new, refreshing arrangements. The melodies are clearer, the mood isn't as dark and the rhythms are more upbeat."

Still, Brabenec cautions, don't expect any new songs at the show. "Our songwriter Milan Hlavsa is working on new material, but we are very lazy and are moving very slowly. We want to make sure the songs are good before we play them. We plan to start working on them after the tour."

AN EMIGRANT AT HOME

Brabenec, who moved back to Prague from Canada in 1997, says life has changed so much there that he feels like an immigrant in his homeland. He hopes the resurrected Plastic People of the Universe will once again make a difference in the cultural discourse, developing songs to reflect the new Czech Republic.

"Democracy is a long ways off. People are looking for freedom and what it means. I'm still trying to figure that out for myself."

PLASTIC PEOPLE OF THE UNIVERSE

The Czech rock band makes its San Francisco debut at 10 p.m. Friday at Bottom of the Hill, 1233 17th St., San Francisco. Tickets: \$8. Call (415) 621-4455.