

Rock 'n' Revolution

By Jon Pareles

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COUNTLESS rock bands have sung about rebellion. One of the few that can claim it spurred a revolution is the Plastic People of the Universe, who — starting with no political agenda — catalyzed democracy in Czechoslovakia.

The story of the Plastics (as fans call the band) is central to Tom Stoppard's play "Rock 'n' Roll," although it is told from the sidelines by fictional characters. 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.

Throughout "Rock 'n' Roll" music is never mere entertainment. It's not propaganda, either; there are no political or protest songs. (The Plastics have recorded only one directly political song during their career.) Instead music is variously a refuge, a cry from the heart, a flag of defiance and a token of freedom. "The play perhaps could be called 'It's Not Only Rock 'n' Roll,'" Mr. Stoppard said. "Because it's not."

The Plastic People of the Universe got started in Czechoslovakia in 1968, the year Soviet tanks rolled into Prague and shut down the liberalization known as Prague Spring. The band was a gaggle of arty hippies who considered themselves outside politics. But in the mid-1970s the Plastics' run-ins with an increasingly stifling Communist government spurred the Czech human-rights movement named after its petition and manifesto, Charter 77, which was a direct response to the trial and imprisonment of musicians. From a decade of resistance by Charter 77 came the bloodless Velvet Revolution that ended Communist rule in Czechoslovakia.

A student demonstration in Prague in 1968.
Imagno/Getty Images



The Plastics' dark, low-fi music is far better known to human-rights groups than to rock fans. It has appealed to downtown New York musicians with its angularity and intransigence, and the critic Ritchie Unterberger gave the band a chapter in his 1998 book, "Unknown Legends of Rock 'n' Roll: Psychedelic Unknowns, Mad Geniuses, Punk Pioneers, Lo-Fi Mavericks & More." A Czech label, Globus, has reissued the complete Plastic People catalog on CD, and most of the albums are available at tamizdat.org.

"They're the kind of band that people who follow the history of underground music know about them or reference them, but almost nobody has actually heard them," said Jimmy Johnson, chief executive of the mail-order company Forced Exposure, which carries many little-known bands and used to stock the Plastics. "We could sell hundreds of copies of their first album, if we could get it."

Mr. Stoppard, 70, is Czech, but his family emigrated in 1939 and did not return. In an interview at the Bernard J. Jacobs Theater, where the play opened last Sunday, he said he had been aware of the Plastics as a human-rights case since the '70s but discovered their music only when he began writing "Rock 'n' Roll." He also discovered articulate, contentious writings by the Plastics' manager and strategist, Ivan Jirous, and by the playwright Vaclav Havel, a founder of Charter 77, who became president of Czechoslovakia in 1989. (The Plastics' album "Leading Horses" was recorded in 1981 at Mr. Havel's farm, after the farmhouse where the music was first performed was burned down by the Czech secret police.)

Characters in "Rock 'n' Roll" recount actual events and take up longtime arguments — sometimes in the words of people who made them at the time — as they grapple with questions about ideology and pragmatism, politics and counterculture, materialism and spirit, language and lies, art and economics. As the play moves toward the present, one character proclaims, "'Make love not war' was more important than 'Workers of the world, unite!'" And while the play shows the countercultural triumph of music, Mr. Stoppard said political change isn't that simple. "Make love, not war: That's another utopian idea," he said.

“And you can imagine it working very well in a utopia, whether it’s a desert island or a plot of land in the wilds of the Appalachians where 300 people are making love, not war. It might work that way. But it doesn’t seem to be a serious operating factor in the way the world goes.”



The Rolling Stones in 1968.
Peter Shillingford/Camera Press

Like Mr. Stoppard’s other plays “Rock ’n’ Roll” is full of pairings and balances: parallel characters, contrasted events, dialectics. It takes place in capitalist England and in Communist Czechoslovakia, and it revolves around Max, a die-hard Marxist professor enjoying academic freedom at Cambridge University, and Jan, a Czech student he briefly mentors. Jan’s strongest passion is for the psychedelic LPs he brings back to Prague; his fervor for the Plastics derails his life.

Another thread in “Rock ’n’ Roll” involves Syd Barrett, who led Pink Floyd until the damage from drugs and mental illness left him a recluse in Cambridge; the play makes him one of Max’s neighbors. Rock songs blare between scenes while their discographical information is projected on a video screen, and the play’s finale takes place at the first concert by the Rolling Stones in Prague.

The Plastics themselves begin and end the current Czech production of “Rock ’n’ Roll” at the National Theater in Prague, performing live.

Ivan Bierhanzl, who has worked with the Plastics intermittently since 1979 and is now the band’s manager and plays upright bass, said the Plastics were the first rock band to perform at the National Theater, which is more likely to present opera or Shakespeare. Once, the government would not permit the Plastics to perform in public at all, much less at the capital’s highbrow showplace.

Prague residents attempted to stop a Soviet tank in
1968.
Libor Hajskey/Agence France-Presse



The Plastics started as fans, and mimickers, of iconoclastic American bands including the Velvet Underground, Frank Zappa's Mothers of Invention and the Fugs. Like other late-1960s rockers worldwide, they turned shows into happenings, collaborating with visual artists; the Plastics performed in wild makeup, wearing robes made of bedsheets. "We were just a band of freaks, playing rock and roll," Mr. Bierhanzl said by telephone from Prague before one of the Plastics' National Theater performances. "It was the problem of the Communist government and the party that they didn't like us. They didn't like our aesthetics because it was something from the West — longhairs, capitalism."

Around the same time that the Plastics were confounding their authoritarian government, another psychedelic movement — tropicalism in Brazil — was doing something similar, with sunny, gleefully scrambled postmodern pop that made Brazil's dictatorship suspicious. Two ringleaders of tropicalism, Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, were first jailed and then ordered into exile — going to England, where they ending up learning additional ways to internationalize their music. (Mr. Gil is now Brazil's minister of culture.) But for years Communist Czechoslovakia kept most of its rock underground inside the country.

The government revoked the Plastics' credentials as professional musicians in 1970, taking away access to both equipment and official gigs. As they would for nearly two decades, the Plastics persisted, under conditions that make punk-rock look like a luxury cruise. "We were workers," Mr. Bierhanzl said. "For us it was important just to play and listen to our music, and absolutely not to be some heroes."

Led by the composer Milan Hlavsa, who died in 2001, the Plastics turned from imitating American songs to writing their own. They built homemade amplifiers from scrounged transistor-radio parts, and they rehearsed, quietly, in living rooms, perfecting the material they might find a chance to perform at semiprivate concerts once or twice a year.

Paraphrasing some ideas from Mr. Jirous, Mr. Stoppard said that the Plastic People “had an advantage in a certain sense over bands in the West, because they never had to face the temptation.”



Syd Barrett, formerly of Pink Floyd, in 1969.
Mick Rock/Retna

“There was never the possibility of a desire for recognition being gratified,” he said. “So it was never on the table as something which might, as it were, change the way you play and the songs you choose.”

The Plastics’ songs never sounded like party music. Along with the drone of the Velvet Underground, they picked up the dissonances of Eastern European music, added the counterpoint of instruments like bass clarinet and viola, and tossed in flurries of free-jazz saxophone. The vocals cackled and growled in Czech, singing gallows-humored modern poetry. The authorities called the music morbid and weren’t necessarily wrong. The Plastics defied ever-optimistic official pronouncements simply through their bilious, discontented tone.

The Plastics’ most celebrated album, “Egon Bondy’s Happy Hearts Club Banned,” had lyrics by the poet and provocateur Egon Bondy, like those in “No One”: “No one/Nowhere/Never/Ever/Got anywhere/Who me?/Such a fool/I am not.” The songs were recorded in 1974; tapes were smuggled out of Czechoslovakia and released as an LP four years later in France, and copies slipped into Czechoslovakia. Nowadays, as music easily whizzes around the world via the Internet, “Rock ’n’ Roll” — with scenes of Jan and his fragile, irreplaceable collection of Western LPs — recalls how precious vinyl once was.

Plastics concerts were rare, clandestine events organized with sly humor. After the band’s credentials were revoked, it managed to perform at first under the auspices of its manager, Mr. Jirous, an art historian. He would rent a hall for a lecture-demonstration on Andy Warhol and Pop Art; then, after a brief presentation, the Plastics would “demonstrate” a full-length concert set of Velvet Underground songs. Under Czech law couples getting

married could book their own wedding entertainment, so some Plastics friends and fans took their vows and held concerts of the “second culture”: one separate from both officially sanctioned art and the explicit opposition.



Tom Stoppard, author of "Rock 'n' Roll."
Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The Plastics didn't set out to challenge the regime, but to ignore it. “Everybody else just collaborated a little bit with the regime because of work, of money, of studying and jobs and so on,” Mr. Bierhanzl said. “So everybody was a little bit in touch with the government but our crazy band. We were different.”

They were not ignored in return; crackdowns grew increasingly severe. The government's attitude, Mr. Stoppard said, was, “If you're not with us, you're against us.”

In 1974 the Plastics arranged one of their underground concerts in the village of Ceske Budejovice, but the government found out about it. Before it began, fans were shunted into a tunnel and ambushed by club-wielding policemen. All were photographed for police files, and some students were expelled, ending their academic careers.

At first the government took the Plastics more seriously than the opposition did. As “Rock 'n' Roll” recounts, there was little respect, on either side, between the politicians and the freaks. “The rock 'n' roll band didn't think much of the intellectual dissenters, and the intellectuals didn't think much of these dropouts,” Mr. Stoppard said. “The idea was that dropping out was not in fact an adequate response: opting out, ‘Leave me alone.’ Everybody had a perfect right to do it, but it wasn't opposition.”



Brian Cox, who plays a Marxist professor in the play.

Johan Persson

The government took care of that. In 1976, after the Plastics and friends staged another festival of the second culture, 27 people were arrested.

Vratislav Brabenec, the Plastics' saxophonist and sometime lyricist, and Mr. Jirous were convicted of "organized disturbance of the peace" and imprisoned. "They made a big mistake with this trial," Mr. Bierhanzl said. "Without it, maybe nobody would be interested about this band, but the trial was big P.R. for us." At the trial dissidents and dropouts found common ground and forged their alliance.

But it would be more than a decade before they prevailed. In the meantime conditions grew worse. Band members were repeatedly interrogated by the police and sometimes beaten. The Plastics stopped giving concerts after 1981, making music only in private. Mr. Brabenec emigrated to Toronto in 1982. Mr. Jirous spent years in jail. Mr. Hlavsa held the band together until 1988, and then split off his own band with some former Plastic People under a new name: Pulnoc (Midnight), which was allowed to perform in Czechoslovakia and the West. On the eve of the Velvet Revolution the Plastic People were gone. It was hard to tell if the government had finally worn them down or if — despite their conscious intentions — they had somehow served their historical purpose.

Topical protest music can rapidly turn into an artifact; the people involved are gone, the causes won or lost, the slogan grown irrelevant. By the 1990s reggae and hip-hop had outflanked rock as global protest music, although rockers like Bruce Springsteen still lead arena-size protest singalongs. Like much music written under authoritarian regimes, the

Plastic People's songs may well hold double-entendres and sidelong references that attentive local listeners could glean at the time. But their music is more a mood than a manifesto; its bitter, sardonic disquiet lingers.

Mr. Bierhanzl said the Plastics now were "living in contemporary time." The band reunited in 1997 for the 20th anniversary of Charter 77 and has stayed together, with some new members, since the death of Mr. Hlavsa. It is making an album of new material for its own 40th anniversary and releasing an archival DVD.

But it is still exorcising memories by performing at the National Theater. Back in 1977, as the Charter 77 movement was gaining international attention, the Communist government summoned artists to that theater and pressured them to sign a denunciation of the human rights movement. Many were sympathetic to Charter 77's goals and close to its members, but they had families to support and jobs to protect; they signed. "For us," Mr. Bierhanzl said, "it's some kind of satisfaction that now we can play in the same hall." He chuckled. "But it's history."