

Tramps and Bluegrass: A Letter from the Czech Republic

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BRNO, CZECH REPUBLIC -- The music that I have listened most to over the past year is by a Czech group called Druha Trava. I don't speak Czech, but the gritty passion of singer/songwriter Robert Krestan's vocals, combined with the resonance of the sung Czech language, melds with the band's virtuoso instrumentals in a way I find quite thrilling.

I have played their CDs over and over -- and new technology has even allowed me to quantify the obsession. According to the play count feature of my recently purchased Ipod, I have played some of Druha Trava's songs two dozen times or more since I loaded them into the device earlier this summer, and, amazingly, so far I haven't OD'd.

Druha Trava means "Second Grass," and the group is billed as a bluegrass band. In fact, it's the foremost band in the flourishing Czech bluegrass scene. I first heard them a year or so ago when I bounced around the country following the Czech summer festival circuit.



Bluegrass has had a popular following here for decades. There are scores of Czech bluegrass groups; Czech artisans produce banjos and mandolins used by American and other players; and Czech bluegrass musicians win international prizes. The country's annual Banjo Jamboree festival, which takes place in the central Bohemian town of Caslav, is reckoned to be the oldest bluegrass festival in Europe and held its 33rd edition in June.

At Caslav, Druha Trava was named Band of the Year for 2005. Robert Krestan, for the umpteenth time, was named male vocalist of the year, and Druha Trava's banjo player, Lubos Malina and its dobro, or resonator guitar, player, Lubos Novotny, also received the latest of their many Czech honors. Malina's younger brother, Josef, who plays sometimes with the group, was named fiddler of the year. At one point during the festival, an amazing 65 Czech banjo players took the stage in an apparently successful attempt to set a world record for the number of banjo pickers playing in unison. Together, they performed two classic instrumentals -- "Cripple Creek" and "Foggy Mountain Breakdown".

"The little Czech Republic showed the whole world that they have the highest concentration of bluegrass bands on earth," said Lilly Pavlak, a Czech-born bluegrass fan who for more than 30 years has been instrumental in promoting the music in the Czech Republic and abroad.

Lilly, who is in her early 60s, left Czechoslovakia after the Soviet-led invasion in 1968 and has lived in Switzerland more or less since then. For years, starting in 1975, she made tapes of bluegrass music from American LPs and sent them to her friends in Czechoslovakia. At the time, it was difficult, if not impossible, to obtain original American recordings. Lilly's friends copied and recopied her tapes and passed them around from player to player, like secret, even subversive, messages from across the global divide. Indeed, during the darkest years of communist rule, singing American-style music often became an oblique way of expressing protest against the regime.

Lilly was not able to return to Czechoslovakia until 1987, but when she did, she found poignant evidence of how widespread her influence had become. During that homecoming trip, she said, "I hitch-hiked toward the Oslavka River, and the people in the car that stopped for me were listening to a bluegrass tape. It was very familiar to me. I knew exactly what the next song would be -- once, long ago, I had put this tape together for a Czech

friend. I asked the people where they had gotten it, and they told me that a friend of their friend had gotten from his friend. And so, after 12 years, I listened to my own tape again. The quality was terrible, but it was bluegrass, and I was home again."

Lilly's involvement with the music began, as it did for many other Czech fans and musicians, in the so-called Tramp Movement, a uniquely Czech outdoors and music subculture that originated in the 1920s and is still going fairly strong. Tramping grew out of the Boy Scout movement and was particularly influenced by the back-to-nature Woodcraft Indian Movement founded in 1901 by the Canadian author and naturalist Ernest Thomas Seton.

Czech tramps were not American-style hoboes, but for the most part urbanites who took the train out of big cities on Fridays and spent their weekends "living free" -- hiking, canoeing, sleeping under the stars and sitting around campfires, strumming guitars and singing. They called it "going to America," and many romanticized the American west, taking inspiration from western movies and novels. Czech tramps often dressed in cowboy hats and bandanas, gave their camp sites American names and decorated them with totem poles and other hybrid American Indian symbols and imagery.

"People couldn't travel, so they took the romance and made it at home," Lilly told me. "It came from books -- Jack London, John Steinbeck, and the romance of the wild west, Alaska and so on. Because people couldn't travel, they thought about it, and they tried to live their dreams."

Tramp songs, meanwhile, evolved from the informal stuff of campfire camaraderie into a full-blown genre of Czech popular music, merging local folk traditions with American folk songs, country music, cowboy songs, jazz and pop. A recent CD compilation of tramp songs originally recorded between 1920 and 1939 features performances by groups with names like Settlers Club, Camp Boys and Westmen. The cover of its information booklet features drawings of totem poles surrounding a sepia photograph of a group of young men strumming guitars and seated in the woods outside a log cabin bearing the name "Hudson" spelled out above its door.

The tramp movement remained strong under communism, despite periodic attempts by the authorities to regulate it or stamp it out.

"The dominant official opinion always was that tramps were relics of capitalist society and, as such, shall be given no rest until they would disappear from the face of the better socialist world," wrote Pavel Hubka, an amateur historian of tramping. "But they never did, despite vexation on the part of communist police and state Security."

Lilly described to me how, when she was 15, she and her sister were arrested when on a tramping jaunt in Slovakia and accused of spreading American ideology. They were harshly interrogated, and friends of theirs were sent to prison. "They beat me until the blood flowed," she told me.

In June, I accompanied Lilly to what is called a "tramp potlach" -- an all night sing-a-thon held around a blazing bonfire and well lubricated with freely flowing beer. The term derives from "potlatch" -- the term for the ceremony among native cultures in the Pacific Northwest at which hosts give away their possessions to their guests. The potlach I attended was held to celebrate the 45th anniversary of a tramp club near Brno that Lilly had belonged to as a teenager. There must have been 300 people present, most of them appearing to be in their 50s or 60s and most of them dressed in the green army surplus that has replaced cowboy gear as typical tramp attire. Former members had come from as far away as Canada to mark the occasion.



We gathered around a five-foot tall bonfire in a lush meadow clearing on the

Bubrova River that had served for decades as the club's regular camp site. At the edge of the clearing, four totem poles built by club members stood amid a tall pine forest, and a small tepee was set up next to a log cabin very similar to the one pictured on the tramp music CD information booklet. At dusk, participants held a ritual ceremony to light the bonfire, and then the singing began. At first, individuals stepped forward to sing favorite songs. They were cheered by the crowd and presented with wooden plaques bearing painted images of Indian, trapper or woodland scenes. As night fell, the entire group joined in, singing song after song after song, straight through until daybreak. Most of them had lilting melodies with a regular beat -- real "campfire songs." There must have been a dozen people with guitars, and, as far as I could tell, no song was ever sung twice.

"You have 10,000 tramping songs, you know," Lilly told me. "Every group has their own songs, and we have some very good songwriters. You cannot count the music. I could have gone on singing for three days without stopping."

In 1964, Lilly was present at a seminal performance that electrified tramp music fans and changed the face of the Czech acoustic music scene. It was a concert by Pete Seeger, the second of two concerts that the American folk legend performed in Czechoslovakia following a tour of the Soviet Union.

"I had never seen a living American before, and at school we learned the worst things about the 'American imperialists,'" Lilly has recalled. "Some people even believed that they ate little children!" What's more, she said, "Pete sang a lot of songs we knew from tramp music, and so I realized that they must be American originals, not just tramp songs. That was the defining moment not just for me, but for the entire bluegrass movement that followed."

What particularly struck her and other fans were the appearance and sound of Seeger's long-necked, five-string banjo. According to legend, Seeger's performances in Prague and Brno marked the first time after World War II that a five-string banjo was seen and heard to be played live in Czechoslovakia. Lilly and other fans have recalled to me how they would listen to "hillbilly music" on the "forbidden but beloved" American Armed Forces Radio, beamed from West Germany across the Iron Curtain, and try to figure out what instrument made the distinctive, ringing sound that was so different from that of the guitars, mandolins and tenor banjos already

common in the Czechoslovakia.

As soon as Seeger touched the strings, Lilly said, "I knew that this was the strange instrument I liked so much from the hillbilly music."

A Czech musician named Marko Cermak, who was active in the tramp music scene, became so excited that -- according to his own and other accounts -- he built his own long-necked, five-string banjo by studying photographs taken of Seeger at the Prague concert and blown up to life size. Cermak went on to become one of Czechoslovakia's first banjo virtuosi, the father of five-string banjo playing in the country -- godfather in effect to the 65 banjo players who set the record in Caslav this summer for unison playing.

Cermak also founded one of Czechoslovakia's first American-style country and bluegrass groups, the Greenhorns. The Greenhorns became extremely influential by playing Czech language versions of American folk songs, copying arrangements they heard on American Forces Radio. "The Orange Blossom Special" became "Oranzovy Expres," "Thank God I'm a Country Boy" became "Slama v Botach," and "I've Been Working on the Railroad" became "Pracoval Jsem na Trati." In doing so, they, and similar groups, brought these songs firmly into the local musical tradition, fostering a total assimilation of many songs into the Czech repertoire. Even today, many American folk songs are considered to be traditional Czech tramp songs -- or even believed to be Czech originals that were taken to America.

This assimilation was intensified by force after the 1968 invasion, when official censorship made much of America's cultural production taboo. The censors permitted groups to play bluegrass, folk and country music, which performers convinced them was the music of the "oppressed" American proletariat. Still, when performing in public they had to sing in Czech, and censors scrutinized the lyrics. Music groups were also forbidden to have English names, so the Greenhorns had to change themselves into the "Zelenaci," and a fellow group, the Rangers, became "Plavci."

"I only realized that this was American music much later than when I first heard it," Lubos Malina, Druha Trava's award-winning banjo player, told me when I caught up with the band for several concerts this summer. "I was a teenager, 12 or 13 years old, when I first heard these songs, sung in Czech by Czech groups."

Today, many Czech bluegrass musicians exalt the American identity of bluegrass, attacking the music in an almost scientific way in a meticulous effort to recreate the exact sound of American Appalachia.

Druha Trava rejects this approach. Its virtuoso musicians can satisfy the most hardcore fans with scorching versions of traditional bluegrass standards, but as the band's name -- "Second Grass" -- implies, it reaches far beyond the classic bluegrass genre for inspiration. This is precisely why I like its music so much.

Founded in 1991 by Malina, singer/songwriter Robert Krestan and other veterans of the Czech acoustic music scene, Druha Trava uses American roots music as a launch pad for a synthesis of jazz, pop, folk and even classical motifs. In doing so, it transforms a quintessential American idiom into a richly textured, highly personal statement that defies genre definitions.

The group's PR in the United States, where it tours every year (this year from Sept. 20 through Oct. 29) calls it "new acoustic music with bluegrass influences."

"We grew up on simple music, bluegrass music, simple old country music, acoustic country music," Krestan, a striking looking man with shadowed eyes and a shock of grey hair, told me. "It was the music of our youth, of our heart." But, he added, with sensibilities also honed by rock and roll, world music, their own Czech heritage and other influences, "bluegrass music wasn't enough for us."

The band couldn't "squash" everything they wanted to convey into the tight format of traditional bluegrass, he said. Instead, they opted to use bluegrass instruments to play whatever sort of music fit their taste.

Krestan's raw vocals and original songs are an important part of the mix: an American reviewer once said his voice embodied the "power and beauty of a thick slice of unvarnished oak." He often sings cover songs in the original English, but Krestan is famous among Czech fans for his own poetic, and at times provocative, lyrics. Before the 1989 Velvet Revolution, he and Malina honed their skills in a band called Poutnici (Pilgrims), and some of his songs achieved the status of counterculture anthems.

Most recordings from that period are no longer available, but by chance, I

found an old Poutnici LP in the used record bin of a music store in the little Bohemian town of Kutna Hora. It's called "Wayfaring Strangers" and was issued in 1989, when censorship had eased up to some extent. Clearly aimed at a foreign audience, the liner notes are in English and all the songs were performed in English, too, including several of Krestan's own compositions. The American banjoist Tony Trischka, who toured Czechoslovakia in 1988, was featured as a guest.

In the liner notes, Trischka describes Poutnici in much the same terms I would use to describe Druha Trava. "They ... have a unique sound," he says. "Czechgrass instead of Kentucky bluegrass. In other words, they've made it their own, which is wonderful."