

PAUL WILSON

**What's it Like Making
Rock'n'Roll
in a Police State?**

**THE SAME AS
ANYWHERE ELSE,
ONLY HARDER.
MUCH HARDER**

On a snowy day in March 1976, the phone rang in our flat in Prague.

"Ahoy," said a familiar voice, a friend I've known since I first arrived in Prague back in 1967. Like everyone else in the past couple of years, he didn't announce his name. It was a simple precaution in a time of growing paranoia.

"Ahoy," I replied. "What's happening?"

"They arrested the Plastic People and the whole Underground," whispered.

"When?"

"Last night, this morning. It's still going on."

"Are you at home?"

"I'll be soon. I'm calling from a phone booth."

"I'll be right over."

I grabbed my coat and rushed down the wide staircase of the turn-of-the-century tenement house and into the street. As a former Plastic People band member and still an occasional participant, I had reason to fear I might also be rounded up. Thick, heavy snowflakes were drifting down, covering the ancient paving stones and the orange tiled roofs of Prague's Old Town. On the corner, boys were slapping a tennis ball against the wall of a Baroque church with hockey sticks. Here and there, forlorn graffiti stared out at me from the crumbling, rough-cast plaster that covers most buildings in the city: JETHRO TULL, BLACK SABBATH, a hammer and sickle joined to a swastika with an equal sign. I walked across the Charles Bridge, a medieval make-work project built six hundred years ago to span the Vltava River winding northward through the heart of Prague.

Less than two months ago, right here on this bridge, the Plastic People and about thirty other musicians had all posed for a picture to be used on the invitation to the Second Festival of the Second Culture, an underground event featuring twelve bands held in a secluded village tucked away in the South Bohemian hills. 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.

When I arrived in Czechoslovakia late in the summer of 1967 - to teach English and discover what Socialism was like in practice - the entire country was poised on the threshold of a tremendous political, social and cultural upheaval that has gone down in history as the Prague Spring.

One of the many signs of change in the air was rock'n'roll, or Big Beat, as the Czechs called it at the time. In 1967 and 1968, there were beat groups, beat clubs and beat festivals everywhere. In Prague alone there were hundreds of groups, ranging from neighborhood garage bands to professional groups with names like the Matadors, the Rebels, Juventus, Olympik, Flamengo, Vulkan or Stop the Gods.

By the standards I was used to, the concerts were not especially exciting, that is if you were looking for blazing, high-decibel, mind-searing performances. The bands tended to sound pedestrian and slack, and dancing when it was allowed at all, was Arthur Murray jive, but the young audiences were warm, and there was keen enthusiasm and eagerness in the air.

Contrary to what most people imagine, the Soviet invasion in August 1968 did not put a stop to things overnight. The momentum that was built up during the Prague Spring carried over well into 1969, and what ultimately killed it were not Russian tanks, but Czech bureaucrats.

It was in this immediate, post-invasion period in late 1968 that the Plastic People of the Universe - "The Psychedelic Band of Prague" - was formed. The moving spirit and founder of the group, bass player Milan Hlavsa, had come up through several bands with names like the Undertakers, the New Electric Potatoes and Hlavsa's Fiery Factory, before forming the Plastics with two of his schoolmates, Jiří Števích and Michal Jernek. Pavel Zeman, also from the neighborhood, filled out the lineup on drums.

Eyewitness accounts of early Plastic People gigs all agree on one point: they made up in energy and showmanship for what they lacked in musical ability. In addition to Velvet Underground covers like *Venus In Furs* and Doors tunes like *Light My Fire* they were already playing their own material, wild compositions with suggestive titles like *Men Without Ears* and *Crematorium Smoke* and incomprehensible lyrics. They wore strange costumes and garish makeup. The stage was banked high with huge speakers, only two or three of which worked. Their main prop was a large model

¹ The village of Bojanovice where the so called Second Festival of the Second Culture took place in February 1976 is not actually situated in South Bohemia, but is just 25 km southwest of Prague.

flying saucer, and a big sign was fixed to the front of the podium, declaring in bold English: JIM MORRISON IS OUR FATHER!

This understandable defiance of biological paternity becomes even more meaningful when you realize that the Plastics, like most of their fans, had fathers who were in one way or another identified with the system. Števích's father was a secret policeman, Hlavsa's worked for the State Bank. Once Hlavsa had shot his brother in the stomach with an air rifle and then barricaded himself in his room with a hatchet when his brother and father had tried to force him to cut his hair. It took a psychiatrist to restore an uneasy truce to the family. Hlavsa's forearms were cross-hatched with scars. Flirtation with suicide, among some young Czechs, was an almost obligatory rite of passage.

In 1969, the Plastic People met Ivan Jirous. Jirous was a bright, energetic and very determined young man whose first loves were literature and art. Then he heard the Beatles. And, as the Lou Reed song goes, his life was changed by rock'n'roll. He came to Prague, studied art history, hung around the nascent rock scene, grew his curly chestnut hair long, and wrote inflammatory articles.

At the time, Jirous was working with the Primitives Group - who were psychedelic band in Prague in those days - helping them to stage wild, extravagant shows that were more like happenings than rock concerts. But by the spring of 1969, he had begun to feel that the Primitives were stagnating, and when he saw the Plastic People play at the Beatsalon in 1969, he felt the old excitement all over again. They had, he said later, "that inner tension that has made rock into a spiritual instrument to set a whole generation in motion".

In a matter of weeks, Jirous had become the Plastics' artistic director, taking charge of everything except the business end of things - which at this stage was looked after by a professional manager - and the music, which he left in the band's hands.

In the fall of 1969, a friend introduced me to Ivan Jirous on the street and he invited us to come to his place for a potato dumpling feast, as he called it. At the time, he was living with his wife Věra in a small side street apartment in Prague's east end. Two of the Plastic People were already there when we arrived: Hlavsa, with long, sleek black hair, a spontaneous laugh and the features of a North American Indian, of which he was very proud; and Josef Janíček, a hard-working, soft-spoken fellow whose nose was slightly out of kilter. Janíček had recently joined the band after the Primitives (for whom he played guitar) split up.

During the long preparations for supper, in which everyone took part, Jirous kept up a running monologue on Czech history and on how, even in the blackest of times (and the times were steadily getting blacker now)

38 the Czechs had always managed to keep the flame of culture alive. We drank vast quantities of lovely golden beer brought from the taproom across the street in large ceramic jugs. In between monologues, Jirous would put his favorite records on a battered turntable jacked into a World War II radio. Sated with heavy dumplings, sauerkraut and beer, I lay back and listened to the Velvet Underground, Captain Beefheart, the Doors and the Fugs, and as I listened, I began to feel a depth in the music that I had never felt before, as though I were hearing it for the first time with Czech ears. I remember in particular the Fugs' haunting, stripped-down version of *Dover Beach* by Matthew Arnold. I'd studied the poem in school, but now the familiar lines, "And we are here as on a darkling plain... where ignorant armies clash by night" seemed to express directly the agony I knew so many Czechs were feeling, the agony of being caught in the middle of a pitched battle of faiths, ideologies and political systems, with no visible way out.

A few weeks later, in early December, I saw the Plastic People perform. It was at the steadiest gig they ever had, before or since, a weekly dance in a village called Horoměřice, just north of Prague. Every Sunday afternoon, three buses would collect all the long-haired kids from the beer halts of central Prague and drive them out to the village. The pub was a typical rural hostelry, with a taproom at one end and a large hall with a stage at the other. It was packed with kids, jostling one another around, smoking like furnaces and drinking beer as though they were afraid the pub-keeper would soon run out.

The stage was decorated with gigantic inflated polyethylene cigars.

Just as it was getting dark outside, the Plastics came on wearing white satin sheen gowns that looked as though they had slept in them, and dark, sinister makeup. When they broke into a spirited version of *White Light, White Heat*, half the audience rushed forward to the edge of the stage, while the other half broke into a loping, free-form dance that had nothing at all to do with Arthur Murray. At the climax of the song, a fellow with no eyelashes or eyebrows ignited two bengal fires, which filled the room with a choking, acrid smoke, then he squirted an ampoule of lighter fluid into his mouth and did a fire-breathing act right on the dance floor. The Plastics sang all the lyrics, even to their own songs, in English, though it wasn't an English I could understand. Their playing was rough and ragged at times, but I felt it only needed time to cure it. When Jirous loped over, rolling his eyes and shaking his hair, to ask what I thought, I told him they were wonderful, but that they needed to play together a lot more. He peered at me for a moment, and then said, "Have you any idea, man, just how difficult it is to get gigs right now?"

I didn't, but was soon to find out.

39 In the fall of 1970, I was invited to join the band as vocalist and rhythm guitarist, along with Jifí Kabeš, a viola player who had once played for a 60s rock'n'roll group called the Teenagers. By this time, as part of the general cultural purges going on across the country, the Plastics had lost their professional status and with it, their basic equipment, most of which had been loaned to them by the state-run booking agency. And two of the original members, Števích and Jernek, had quit.

The plan was to regroup, become as self-sufficient as possible (Janíček, who was a good electrician, was making a P.A. system, a simple mixing board and an amplifier) and to play as amateurs while trying to regain the all-important professional status. The biggest problem, apart from equipment and instruments, was the Catch-22 that faces all amateur rock bands in Eastern Europe - where to practice. Without official status, it is impossible to get rehearsal space, and without rehearsal space, it is difficult to become good enough to satisfy the juries who sit in judgment over every musical act in the country.

We solved the matter temporarily by practicing acoustically in the flats of accommodating relatives. Even this was difficult. There is a chronic shortage of housing in Czechoslovakia and it is not unusual to find three generations living on top of one another in a single two-room flat. Extending hospitality to a five-piece rock band, therefore, is not something lightly undertaken. Moreover, although we could learn the vocal and instrumental parts this way, we had no way of knowing how we would sound onstage, amplified; it was like trying to paint a huge, full-color mural by candlelight. A lot of our rehearsal time was spent polishing the cover tunes we were doing, and this meant spending hours listening over and over again to the same records. The problem was that no one had a stereo set, and it was often painfully difficult to decipher words and individual instrumental lines in mono.

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. Understandably, the 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. The influence of Zappa, the Velvet Underground and the Fugs, of course, can be traced in all this, sometimes

40 quite specifically. But the powerful atmosphere the music generated – and still generates – comes straight from the band's own collective genius.

Our first concert was in fact our first full-fledged rehearsal as well. Suchá is about thirty kilometers north of Karlovy Vary (Karlsbad) and the local beat club was a low-ceilinged, jerry-built "cultural center" with a stage at one end and garish, hand-painted portraits of dead rock stars on the walls. Our name was scarcely legible on the posters, but across the sign, in huge print was the legend: 20 METERS FROM THE WOODS! I discovered later that this too had to do with the housing shortage in Czechoslovakia. Young lovers had almost no chance to be alone and rock concerts held near an accommodating forest were an ideal solution.

With Jimi Hendrix peering at us from the black wall, we set up and did a sound-check that we managed to drag out for almost an hour while we surreptitiously ran through as much of our repertoire as we could squeeze in. The manager, a thin, jittery fellow with a goatee, paced nervously up and down. He had a large crowd of teenagers milling around outside, drinking cheap vermouth and getting surlier by the minute. As soon as we finished, they surged into the hall.

We couldn't have asked for a better opening act, Aktual was a group put together by Czech artist Milan Knížák using very unconventional instruments (like power tools and Jawa motorcycles) played by a bunch of rootless kids plucked off the streets of Marienbad. They were far more audacious artistically and musically than we were, and the audience had come expecting something more conventional. Although we were still awkward and out of focus, we at least sounded more like what they were used to. Still, the concert was a shock to me. We had no monitors, neither then nor later, so I couldn't hear myself sing or play, and what I could hear sounded awful. There was a lot of coming and going in the audience, yet they seemed glad to have us there. Any rock'n'roll band was better than none.

During the two years I was with the Plastic People, we played about fifteen times, by my rough count, in front of a live audience. And that was the band's heyday. The type of concert varied. Sometimes it would be a simple high school or youth club dance. Sometimes it would be a special event like the Homage to Andy Warhol gig in February 1972 at the Music F Club in Prague, where Jirous gave a slide show and lecture on American pop art and we "illustrated" it with songs by the Velvet Underground. We played in small towns and large cities, and wherever we went, we were followed by a band of faithful fans who were always there when we played, regardless of weather or distance. We often left mixed reactions behind us – usually the split was along age lines – but people never forgot us.

41 One indication of the slow spread of the band's reputation – or notoriety – was the fact that the police were beginning to take an interest in what we were doing. Sometime in 1971 they began an investigation into whether we were making money illegally. ("Indulging in illegal enterprise" is how the criminal code phrases it.) One by one (myself excepted, for some reason) the Plastics were interrogated, but no charges were made.

In the fall of 1971, we finally found a place to rehearse that was not in someone's lap. It was an old brick vaulted cellar in a condemned tenement house in Holešovice, just a shift away from the Prague abattoirs. The dirt floor was littered with butts, broken glass and wires. There was no heat and when winter set in, we practiced in our coats and kept warm with bottled beer and rum. The only concession to beauty in the place was a Mothers of Invention poster stolen from a hoarding in Berlin. But it was a magic place, because for the first time since I joined the band, we could actually spend time playing together, and not just learning mechanical riffs to be glued together later onstage. It was at this point, I think, that what the Plastics had absorbed from the Velvet Underground and other groups started to loosen up their own more structured approach to songwriting: they began coming up with material that, of all their music, was the most clearly poised between America and Europe.

We premiered the new material above ground in June 1972 in a factory works club on the other side of Prague.² It was the largest concert we had ever played in the city, and also the last. Egon Bondy, an underground poet who was also very popular with the younger generation, was in the audience, and was ecstatic at what he heard. He remarked that the Plastics must try to put his poetry to music. And so the seed was planted, for out of the collaboration grew the music that eventually appeared on their first LP, *Egon Bondy's Happy Hearts Club Banned*.

That same evening, a drunken auxiliary police officer provoked a showing incident in the lobby of the building. Two uniformed cops arrived and while Jirous was trying to explain the situation to them, they shot mace into his eyes from point-blank range and dragged him off to a local police station. He was released later that night after the whole thing had been explained by friends and witnesses who went with him to the police station. But there were no more concerts in Prague and soon after that, the Plastics were forced to move out of the cellar. The tenement house in Holešovice was pulled down to make way for a vacant lot full of weeds.

² The gig in ZK ČKD Polovodiče, Krč, Prague, also mentioned by I. M. Jirous. It took place on 29th June 1972.

When I left the band later in 1972, it was not a split but a gradual drifting away that had to do with the new direction they were moving in. As long as their music had primarily been based on Western rock music and sung in English, there was something I could bring to the band out of my own experience and background. But now the band was being pulled more powerfully back toward its own roots by a desire to address its audience in its own language and regardless of how far I had managed to assimilate, this was something I couldn't contribute to, though I supported the move entirely.

The basic shift in direction coincided with the arrival of saxophonist Vratislav Brabenec, a lanky redhead with a nose even further out of joint than Janíček's; Brabenec had a background in jazz rather than rock, and he could play soaring, exhilarating free-form solos that were apparently at odds with the more formalistic approach the Plastics had. Brabenec resolutely refused to have any truck with cover tunes, and the die was cast.

In later 1972, with Brabenec aboard, the Plastics tried once again to gain professional status. This time, quite unexpectedly, a jury of official pop stars, music critics and other musicians were impressed enough to grant them a license. Two weeks later, however, a letter arrived from the Prague Cultural Center (PKS) – the booking agency – overturning the jury's decision on the grounds that the Plastics' music was "morbid" and would have a "negative social impact". Ivan Jirous immediately phoned PKS and asked them if there were any other agencies that could authorize the Plastics to perform in public. He was told that PKS was the only one. Thus began the strategy of creating private occasions to perform, like wedding celebrations or birthday parties. There could be no question of giving up or turning back.

As it became more and more difficult to do things "officially", the underground music scene in Prague began to grow, and there can be no doubt that the example set by Jirous and the Plastics was a major inspiration. A young poet, Pavel Zajíček, joined with Hlavsa to form a group called DG 307, essentially a voice band that used unconventional instrumentation to create dramatic nerve-lacerating settings for Zajíček's visionary verse. Another band formed in this period was a proto-punk outfit called Umělá Hmota (Artificial Material), which quickly divided like a living cell into two units. The UH bands were raw, energetic, and direct, learning as they performed, and their music owed as much to the Plastics as it did to American bands like MC 5. Already the underground was developing its own style and traditions.

At the same time, the sense of being encircled by hostile forces grew. In the summer of 1973, Ivan Jirous was arrested along with three friends after they insulted a pensioner in a Prague beer hall. Normally, they would

have spent the night in the drunk tank and been released, but the pensioner was a retired secret policeman and the insult had included the phrase "bald-headed Bolshevik". All four were sent to prison, Jirous pulling ten months.

While he and the others were still in jail, the Plastics were asked to play at a concert near the city of České Budějovice in South Bohemia, an event that would come to be known as the Budějovice massacre.³ By now rock concerts were so rare that the news spread like a prairie fire, and hundreds of kids from all over the country converged on Budějovice for a serious good time. But before the Plastics had a chance to play, several busloads of police arrived, cancelled the event and then ordered everyone out of town. Masses of young people were herded into the Budějovice train station by cops and soldiers with dogs and riot gear, and were then driven through a tunnel leading under the tracks to the platforms. The tunnel was lined with truncheon-wielding goons, and a lot of blood was spilled and limbs broken. All those destined for Prague were crammed Nazi style into one end of a single passenger car and then, as the train rocked and rolled back to Prague, they were taken one by one into a compartment, photographed, interrogated briefly, and then sent to the other end of the car. At every station along the way, there were hoards of policemen making sure that no one escaped. In the end, six people were sent to prison and dozens were expelled from school. The Budějovice massacre was a well-coordinated paramilitary operation, the opening skirmish in a holy war against unconventional rock music that has been going on ever since.

The response of the underground was typical: business (or pleasure) as usual. A few months later, in September 1974, the first large festival of underground music was held.⁴ Smaller concerts were organized from time to time in towns near Prague. Despite the extreme discretion with which these events were planned the police almost always showed up. Sometimes they merely took the names of everyone there; at other times, they made arrests but from the Budějovice massacre on, the police were a constant factor in anything the underground did. That was why it was so astonishing when none showed up at the second festival of underground music in January 1976.⁵ Now, as I found myself walking across the Charles Bridge two months later, watching the snow float down onto the

³ The event took place in Rudolfov, near České Budějovice, on 30th March 1974.

⁴ The so-called First Music Festival of the Second Culture, held in the village of Postupice near Benešov on 1st September 1974.

⁵ The so-called Second Music Festival of the Second Culture, held in the village of Bojano-vice, southwest of Prague, on 21st February 1976 (not in January!).

44 venerable roof tops of Prague, it seemed clear to me that the police had used those two quiet months to prepare for their next big move.

Over a bottle of Myslivecká, a caustic, rye-based drink, my friend and I surveyed the devastation: twenty-seven people, most of them members of the Plastic People, DG 307, Umělá Hmoty and Hever & Vazelína, arrested; the Plastics' amps, speakers and some instruments, most of it painstakingly constructed by hand over the past five years and shared out among the underground bands on a communal basis, seized: dozens of flats raided, ransacked and countless photos, tapes, samizdat texts and books confiscated; over a hundred people interrogated, it was the largest police action in the country since the early 70s, and in an unexpected way, it changed the face of rock'n'roll in Czechoslovakia.

The very next day, the Western press agencies in Prague picked up the story and sent it out. The news caused ripples of consternation and incomprehension in the West: "The Czechs lock people up just for their music? Incredible!" Within twenty-four hours, the news was beaming back into Czechoslovakia via the BBC, the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, which has an estimated three million listeners. Suddenly, the whole country knew about the Plastic People of the Universe. The government retaliated - too late - with its own gutter press version of the arrests: these so-called musicians and artists, said *Rudé Právo*, the Party daily, were just long-haired neurotic drug addicts and mental cases who took delight in the grossest of perversions and deliberately sang vulgar, antisocial songs. For the thousands of disaffected and alienated young people in the country, it was the best advertisement the Plastics could have wished for.

Another unexpected consequence of the arrests was that the banned intellectual elite of Czechoslovakia - people who had been ousted from public life after the Soviet invasion - rallied to the defense of the underground bands. A group of intellectuals, including the play-wright Václav Havel and the philosopher Jan Patočka, wrote an open letter to West German novelist Heinrich Böll appealing for support. A former member of Dubček's politburo⁴ wrote an open letter to the leaders of Czechoslovakia, and so did a group of ex-lawyers and ex-judges, themselves all victims of the political repression.

By the time the underground was brought to trial, all but seven had been released from prison. The rest were charged with an "organized dis-

⁴ A former member of Dubček's politburo: Zdeněk Mlýnář, *Proti falši a lži. Otevřený dopis politickým činitelům, odpovědným za zákonnost v ČSSR*, in: *Listy*, VI, no. 6, December 1976, Rome (Italy), p. 5.

turbance of the peace". In one trial, three members of the Hever & Vazelína were sentenced to up to fifteen months in prison. In the major trial, which took place in Prague September 1976, Ivan Jirous, Vratislav Brabeneč, Pavel Zajíček and Sváta Karásek were sentenced to terms ranging from eight months to one and a half years. Jirous was given the longest.

Inspired by the example of the musical underground, and by the energy and solidarity the trials had generated, Václav Havel (now in prison himself) and others went on to give shape to the human rights movement launched in January 1977. The result was Charter 77, a manifesto calling for the Czechoslovak regime to honor the commitments to human rights that it made by signing the Helsinki Agreements and the UN covenants.

While it lifted people's spirits tremendously, Charter 77 also brought the roof down. The police made widespread arrests and harassed the signatories endlessly, and this time I was picked up too, in a classic, early morning arrest. During the eight-hour interrogation that followed, I refused to talk about anyone but myself, but what I said was apparently enough. I was given until July 15, 1977 to leave the country.

A few days before my departure, the Plastics and I got together, polished up all the songs we used to do together, and held a small party for about fifty people in an old house in the hills near Děčín in Northern Bohemia.⁷ For a couple of hours we played the old repertoire, reliving the days that now seemed as distant as an idyllic dream of youth, the days when it was still possible to pretend, for a while at least, that we were living in a normal country.

At midnight, there was a knock on the door. Suddenly, the house was crawling with police and within half an hour, about ten of us were on our way down the winding road in the back of squad cars. In Děčín the police station was bustling with red-eyed plainclothesmen carrying truncheons. I was separated off from the rest and when I refused to be interrogated, they put me in a car and drove me back toward Prague. As we got close to the city where I had spent almost ten years of my life, the cop beside me in the back seat - who I learned later may have been Kouřelka, the mastermind of the whole police campaign against the underground - said to me:

"Look, you'll be leaving the country in a few days. When you get to the West, we don't want you doing anything - you know - to help the Plastics. Know what I mean?"

"When I get to the West, I'll be outside your jurisdiction."

⁷ The farewell party and concert was held in Jan Princ's family house in the village of Rychnov, near Děčín, on 9th July 1977.

"Is your wife going with you?"

"She hasn't got her papers yet."

"But I take it you want to see her again."

I looked at him, but I couldn't see his face in the dark.

"Call it blackmail if you want," he said, "but you'd better believe me."

The driver pulled the car over to the side of the road and stopped. We were still in the middle of empty, black countryside. "Our orders were to take you to Prague," Koudelka said. "Here you are."

He pointed up ahead. A small dirty sign leaned crazily over the ditch, PRAHA. The driver got out and opened my door, which had no handle on the inside.

"Goodbye, Mr. Wilson. And if I were you, I'd advise your friends to lay off the music-making for a while."

"If you can't stop them; how can I?"

The door slammed, the car spun around and I was left standing there in the night with the lights of Prague flickering faintly in the distance like a constellation of fallen stars.

A few days later, I arrived in London, England to wait for my wife to come out. It was the summer of 1977 and punk rock was in full swing, joyful exuberance in grimy clubs, mindless weekend punch-ups on Sloane Square, instant analysis in the *New Society*. The same bands that the Plastic People had been inspired by ten years ago – The Velvet, Captain Beefheart – were now being rediscovered. I went to an early Slits/Sham 69 gig where the new Sex Pistols documentary was shown, full of arrests, protest, rage and *lese-majesté*. Afterward I approached someone in the Pistols' entourage with a suggestion: why not smuggle a copy of the film into Czechoslovakia, give the Plastic People a lift.

"The Plastic People?" he responded in a dead-eyed, cocky public school whine. "They're anti-socialist. I don't support fascist rock bands. I'd rather send the film to South Africa."

Ah yes, images of Sid Vicious smelling his socks to raise consciousness in Soweto. I was sorry I'd asked.

Back in Czechoslovakia, Ivan Jirous was released from prison in the fall of 1977 and almost immediately rearrested after making some inappropriate remarks at the opening of an art exhibition.⁸ He got another eighteen months. Then last November he was arrested a fourth time – this time for his connection with an underground magazine called *Window*.⁹

⁸ I. M. Jirous was arrested and imprisoned for the third time in October 1977. The pretext was his speech at the opening of an art exhibition (Jiří Lacina's) in Prague. He spent 18 months in prison.

In September of this year, his sentence of three and a half years in a maximum security prison was upheld by an appeals court. In such prisons, you are allowed a single one-hour visit per year. Most of your fellow inmates are lifers. There are serious fears that Jirous will not survive. It is a heavy price to pay for keeping the faith, ignited long ago by a few Anglo-American rock bands

The Plastic People continued to write music, but they were, and still are, constantly harassed by the police. Younger bands tend to avoid them, says Vratislav Brabenec, who has been living in Vienna since last April, because they carry the police around with them like lice. Still, since 1977, they have managed to write, record and perform four major works. Outstanding among them is the *Passion Play*, a magnificent rock rendition of the Crucifixion of Christ. It was performed and recorded in a barn belonging to Václav Havel while the barn was surrounded by platoons of police, staked out in the fields and woods around the farm. The Plastics have also performed in country houses, but in every case, the police have subsequently either blown the place up or burned it down. Their most recent work, a cycle of songs based on the work of a radical Czech philosopher Ladislav Klíma, and a concert based on lyrics by Vratislav Brabenec can scarcely be described in musical terms any more.¹⁰ They are the distillation of a struggle. On the surface, it's a struggle with a regime that cannot tolerate any music or art except that made in its own image. But essentially, it is a struggle between the principles of life and death.

A new generation is coming up in the Czech underground, however, and there are signs that, despite the repression, the scene is spunky and alive. A year ago, over thirty groups were banned in Prague alone, a fact that is more hopeful than it first appears. The new bands have names like Energie G, Garage, Frogs' Phlegm and Dog Soldiers.

A decade ago, the Plastic People stood almost alone. Now their progeny carry on. Even officially sanctioned music magazines reflect the fact that rock'n'roll is on the boil in Czechoslovakia. Yet the band that kept the

⁹ I. M. Jirous was arrested and imprisoned for the fourth time in November 1981 – allegedly for helping publish the samizdat magazine *Vokno* (*Window*). He spent 3 and a half years in prison where he wrote his chef d'oeuvre, a collection of poems *Magorovy jabutí písničky* (*Magor's Swan Songs*).

¹⁰ The concert given by the Plastic People in October 1979 – *Jak bude po smrti* (*How It Will Be After Death or Afterlife*) – with music based on texts by Ladislav Klíma, took place in an underground community country house in the village of Nová Víska, near the towns of Kadaň and Chomutov, Northern Bohemia. The recording was last released on the CD: *The Plastic People of the Universe, Jak bude po smrti, PPU VI., 1979, Globus International, Praha, 1998.*

48 flame alive through the 70s is never mentioned in print. Officially, the Plastic People do not exist.

Recently Milan Hlavsa was waiting for a light to change and overheard a conversation between two Prague teenagers.

"Have you heard? The Plastics are all in America."

"Bullshit, man," said the other. "They're all in jail."

And Hlavsa, his ghostly non-persona smiling, brushed intangible shoulders with them and walked on by.

February 1983

[magazine *Musician*]

EGON BONDY

The Roots of
the Czech Literary
Underground
in 1949–1953