

Rock and Revolution East and West

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I recently sat in a major Moscow theater and got to thinking about rock and roll music.

That's no big deal because I often think about rock and roll, and not only when I'm in theaters. That was one of my big wrong turns, when I sailed past music as a way of life. But in this case my thoughts were doubly not surprising, because I was attending Tom Stoppard's "Rock 'n' Roll" at the National Youth Theater.

Stoppard, born Tomas Straussler in Zlin, Czechoslovakia, wrote his play several years ago, in part, to shed light on the role that popular music played in the lives of people living in the Eastern bloc during the final decades of the Soviet era.

I have seen some suggest that "Rock 'n' Roll" illustrates the way that music fomented dissent and revolution in a country like Czechoslovakia, whose 1968 Prague Spring, a social and political attempt to break with the Soviet Union, coincided with the rise (and fall)

of rebellious rock music in the West.

I didn't see that in Adolf Shapiro's production of the play at the National Youth Theater. What I saw there was that history will do what it does. Politicians, policemen and people will live their lives, striving for better and doing worse, as they always have. But through it all there is music. And in the second half of the 20th century there was a kind of music that captured the sensations of alienation, rebellion and yearning perhaps like no music had before. It was a parallel, not a driving, force.

The musical culmination of this production was the Rolling Stones song "It's Only Rock and Roll."

"I know, it's only rock and roll

But I like it, like it, yes I do!"

And since I do, too, with a passion that sometimes tries the patience of my loved ones, I could not help but think about what this meant in a Russian context.

Consider this: Stoppard includes Syd Barrett of Pink Floyd, the Velvet Underground and the Rolling Stones in his dramatic narrative. Shapiro's production incorporates recordings of Lou Reed singing "Waiting for my Man," Bob Dylan singing "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight," the Stones performing "Play with Fire," the Beach Boys' "Barbara Ann," U2's "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For."

When have you heard these musicians or these songs used in a Russian setting? Maybe the Stones and U2 make it in by way of leakage on occasion, but anyone who knows musical tastes in Russia recognizes this list as exotic and even alien.

What were the influences on Russian youth from the 1960s on? The Beatles, of course, who were fairly quickly supplanted by Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin. Most Russians to this day believe that Elvis Presley's gold lamé suit was a symbol of victory rather than what it really was — the sign of a hard, painful road traveled. If there is a bigger cliché than Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water" in Russian rock circles I don't know what it is.

You see, if Stoppard and Shapiro represent Czech tastes accurately, the musical affinities of the young in Russia and East Europe — at least in terms of the iconic music of the 1960s and 1970s — emerge as sharply divergent. Russians apparently lean toward the monolithic sounds of nascent heavy metal. Their Slavic neighbors to the West appear to be susceptible to a more varied and eclectic strain of music that has experimental and intellectual pretensions.

Somebody might just blurt it out and say: "My goodness! The Czechs have better taste!" But far be it from me to cast aspersions!

Still, in all the numerous and vastly frustrating conversations I have had with Russian friends about rock and roll, I have never heard anyone mention Syd Barrett, the Velvet Underground or Lou Reed. My few feeble attempts to discuss the importance of Bob Dylan are usually cut off by comments like, "oh, you mean that bard guy? He was like Vladimir Vysotsky wasn't he?"

I love Vysotsky as much as you, but if you want to get my dander up say that to me again.

I once gathered a Russian rock band in my living room. I thought I was doing a favor by introducing them to some of the finest, most influential music made in America in the middle decades of the 20th century. I sat them down in front of my television and put on a DVD of "The Last Waltz," Martin Scorsese's brilliant concert film of The Band playing one last time in 1976 before their original line-up parted ways. But this wasn't just The Band. It was Muddy Waters. It was Dr. John. It was Van Morrison. It was Neil Young. It was Bob Dylan. It was the Staple Singers! I mean, if I'm a musician I'm going to learn something from this movie, I just know it.

By the third song in the film every one of the Russians in my apartment had drifted off to more important endeavors. A conversation in another room, finding a beer in the fridge, smoking a cigarette in the entryway. I sat there in my living room watching brilliance, depth and inspiration all on my lonesome. I used to feel better about getting dumped by girlfriends.

So the Czechs listened to Syd Barrett/Pink Floyd's "See Emily Play"? What a revelation! That's only a half-step from the Kinks at their most wonderfully twee and innovative, and when has anybody east of Kaliningrad ever cared about the Kinks?

What does this say about revolution, change, the East, the West? Ah, maybe nothing. Maybe I shouldn't make too much of this. But there is one thing I want to say on the level of simple observation.

In recent years Bob Dylan has occasionally dipped into Eastern Europe while on tour. By all accounts he plays to full houses and enthusiastic audiences in Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Lithuania and other Former Soviet bloc countries.

I attended Dylan's Russian debut in St. Petersburg in 2008 at a 10,000 seat hockey rink and was not the least surprised to see that maybe half the tickets had sold. Dylan and band were in fine form and a small, vocal contingent of fans gathered around the stage made it a distinctly memorable evening. But one clearly got the impression that the place would really have loved it if Dylan had launched into "Smoke on the Water."

In short, the Czechs rode the Rolling Stones and Syd Barrett to revolutions in 1968 and 1989. The music didn't make them rebel, but the kind of people who were tuned into the music found meaning and purpose in change. In Russia, where Bob Dylan fills half a stadium and a filmed performance of Muddy Waters backed by The Band can't hold the interest of rock musicians, you have to wonder what the odds are for change. We'll have to see what young people are listening to on their iPods — and what they are doing — come March 4, 2012, the day of presidential elections in Russia.

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