

## CZECH BLUEGRASS IN PLAY

*Lee Bidgood*

**Abstract:** *Drawing from scholarship on play, ritual, and performance, I propose that Czech bluegrass thrives – as does my fieldwork – in a state of in-betweenness, in a territory that is between work, play, here and there, self and other. Being comfortable with this kind of in-between state is important for fieldwork, and for music-making – play, I find, is both a central activity and metaphor in both. The bluegrass play I discuss in this essay can become a response to the encroachment of Americanization in economic and cultural globalization, but also a way of being “Americanist” – and entirely Czech.*

**Keywords:** *performance; play; Czech; bluegrass; ethnomusicology*

### Context – America / Americ/čan

As I entered circles of acquaintance and music-making during my initial ethnomusicological fieldwork among bluegrassers (bluegrass music-making participants) in the Czech Republic in the years 2002–3, friends often introduced me as a foreigner by adding a label to my name. I gained an honorific that sometimes seemed like a new surname: “...an American”. This essay focuses on this period and process of “entering the field” as a participating and observing ethnographer. My Americanness played a larger role than in the body of “Czech” experiences that I have built up in the decade since. Then, I was still on the doorstep of the field, in-between here and there – with a perspective that still included two separate worlds.

During this threshold period in my work I was brought into a re-creation of “America” that made me reconsider what that word could mean with regard to my own “Americanness.” For many Czechs, *Amerika* (how I refer to Czechs’ imaginative transformations of elements from the United States) resonates with fictional visions of the Wild West (or *divoký západ*), but is also informed by

memories of the United States' role in founding the first Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, the post-WWII Cold War, as well as more recent experiences with a post-socialist and globalized marketplace in which the US plays a prominent role. Czechs who recreate elements of America – whom I call Americanists – carry out a powerful form of play that adds some more fanciful visions to discussions of economy, politics, and social concerns.

The sense of threshold-crossing that I felt as I first engaged with Czech bluegrass caused me to consider it as an independent world of imaginative play at work within Czech society, providing in its musical form a space that is identified with the past, with the present, with the Czech lands, and with the United States. Through this essay I follow Johann Huizinga's writing as his framing of play brings key elements of my fieldwork into relief. I push against some of Huizinga's ideas, pointing towards a wider consideration of scholarly conceptions of play, especially its ambiguity. While its nature and value might be less clear, I join these scholars in presenting play as a key part of cultural activity.

As I explain below, the deep participation of bluegrassers in financial investment in instruments, attendance at festivals and weekly jam sessions is often akin to a religious devotion – whether the canon a bluegrassers holds to is a set of recordings, a particular set of social ideals, or a family tradition or practice. I use the concept of play not in the sense of Bentham's formulation (via Geertz 1973) of "deep" play as an activity too consequential to engage in, but more in the vein of Diane Ackerman's (2000) formulation of a state, an ecstatic engagement of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) that does involve risk, but can approach or suggest transcendence.

As I will indicate through this essay, this transcendence can emerge as a form of interstitial negotiation; play often affords ways of creating and dealing with ambiguity. Drawing from scholarship on play, ritual, and performance, I propose that Czech bluegrass thrives – as does my fieldwork – in a state of in-betweenness, in a territory rife with ambiguity and paradox that is between work, play, here and there, self and other. Being comfortable with this kind of in-between state is important for fieldwork, and for music-making; play, I find, is both a central activity and metaphor in both.

## **Play in Czech**

During the half-century of Czechoslovak state socialism, a job was often a placeholder, a way of enacting the ideal of socialist labor systems, in many

cases arbitrarily assigned by the government. Productivity on the job was not necessarily rewarded, so energy and creativity were often transferred to the private sphere, where people were free from state controls. In the private sphere, these energies were self-directed with results retained by the individual who exerted them.

The various forms of play that have filled Czech the avocational space in recent history seem to persist in spite of external changes. An illustration: While tending a garden is not a uniquely Czech activity, urban Czechs have a heightened relationship with the small plots of land that they rent or buy, and to which they travel and work on during weekends and holidays throughout the year.

These *zahrady* and small cottages, *chalupy* or *chaty*, are a central part of Czech recreation, an ennobled sort of play that has offered a variety of benefits to Czechs for more than a century. Anthropologist Melinda Reidinger lists some of these benefits in her cultural history of cottaging:

...cottages are inextricably linked for many people with memories of early childhood, with their early years of marriage in which hard work brought great rewards, with the provision of a “healthy” environment for their children to grow in, with the trials and rewards of gardening and sometime raising small livestock, and with expectations of a leisurely retirement in the country (Reidinger 2007: 46).

Cottaging and gardening were also part of the impetus for the Czech environmentalist movement, when in the 1970s Czechs noticed that their recreation spots were deteriorating under the deleterious effects of pollution (Jehlicka 2008: 22). Czechs valued their personal gardens not only as their own small space of beauty and order, but also as a means of providing foodstuffs unavailable through the state-run mercantiles.

I first witnessed the value of this sort of production when my 2002–3 landlord in the Prague borough of Střešovice welcomed me as I moved my bags into the basement apartment of her building with apples from her orchard outside the city. In this gesture, I first realized that the value of play is multilayered. My landlord said she was proud to share apricots and apples from her garden outside the city with me – as she does with her granddaughter – because they were free of the chemicals and processing that are part of foods from the globalized chain supermarkets in the neighborhood (Tesco, Delvita, and Norma). While the scope of this study cannot illustrate the extent to which play suffuses Czech

life (in gardens, hiking, etc.), I follow Reidinger in arguing that the “second life” of cottaging and other forms of often Americanist play has comprised

...a complex parallel and overlapping world with alternative systems of labor, exchange, and socialization. The cottaging “archipelago” has provided conduits for goods, services, and even moral values to circulate when the “official” channels would not or could not oblige (Reidinger 2007: 62).

The main connection between this world of cottages and the bluegrass-related practices that I study lies in the practice of tramping. Tramping began in the early 1900s, when Czechs “...carved out their freedoms in the landscape of the Czech countryside, using the images of romantic pioneering America to live on their own terms during the weekends...” (Bren 2002: 129). Stories and idealized representations of the U.S. Wild West and other frontier locales (from films, books, and records) are central to both the history and current state of tramp play (Hurikan 1940; Pohunek 2011; Jehlička and Kurtz; Symonds and Vareka 2014). This traffic in images could be posed as facile imitation that proves American cultural hegemony; Paulina Bren’s analysis focuses on tramping as a bottom-up “tactical” response to supercultural pressures, using Michel de Certeau’s work (1984) to pose Americanism as a “ruse” of co-production rather than a capitulation of consumption (Bren 2002: 135). In the rest of this article I connect the people, sounds, and sights of my first year of fieldwork with these narratives of recreation from Bren and Reidinger.

Meeting Zbyněk Podskalský, banjoist for the Prague-based bluegrass band Sunny Side, first led me to consider the intersections and divergences of play and work in my fieldwork. Podskalský has a vocation that seems to emerge from a “hobby”: he works making video productions of historical military aviation events and subjects for Czech Television. I saw more of Zbyněk’s life when the band’s fiddler, Jirka, invited me to come and practice with Sunny Side after we met at a Prague bluegrass jam. We met up with the band in Zbyněk’s studio, located at an automotive garage on the northeastern edge of Prague to Zbyněk’s studio behind the building where Mirek, Sunny Side’s bassist, works.

Shelves around the walls held bluegrass paraphernalia, aviation ephemera, and in the corner, there were muddied cycling shoes and a mountain bike suspension fork: objects that point to where Zbyněk directs his time, energy and money. Within the realms of endeavor he participates in, what is “work” and what is “play”? The economic requirements and benefits of the various

endeavors are one way to determine what is “play” and what is work – work is an endeavor that earns money. But in many ways, the work of play (and vice-versa) is shown to have need-fulfilling qualities that go beyond financial benefits. As with the gardens, above, there is something intangible that adds value to effort that is not otherwise necessary.

In their dedication to the music they love and play, Czech bluegrassers prove in concrete ways how important their endeavor is. The cost of suitable instruments, the time and labor required to attain performance proficiency, finding other musicians to play with, are just some of the obstacles that Czechs overcome in their pursuit of the music. And all the while most maintain a solid backbone of intense amateurism that seems in tension with the effort they make. Czech bluegrass seems to live within the music’s “play” qualities: if the music became a profession, it wouldn’t provide the extra-curricular qualities that make it so precious. The avocational nature of the music remains its power, as well as its *raison d’être*.

## Text and Czech Americanist Playspaces

...play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life.  
It is rather a stepping out of ‘real’ life into  
a temporary sphere of activity  
with a disposition all of its own  
(Huizinga 1955: 8).

In *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga suggests a spatial component to play: “All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course” (Huizinga 1955: 10). The Czech bluegrass play-space is laid out in the same territory, and intersects with that of early twentieth-century tramps, who provided a model for many bluegrassers. Images, musical sound, and elements of language are some of the clearest signs of the Americanist disposition; they often serve as signposts that signal entrance into its playspace.

The first Czech tramps were young people anxious to leave not only the industrializing twentieth-century city, but also to escape the social controls that it placed on them. Like the Anglo-American Boy Scouts and the German Wandervogel, they began to “tramp” in woods and fields outside urban areas (Pohunek 2011; Symonds and Vareka 2014). Much of the structure as well as the content of the tramp endeavor was inspired by imaginative reinterpretations

of American texts that ranged from Emerson and Thoreau to Jack London and western novels--even those from non-US sources, e.g. Karl May (Sammons 1998). The flourishing Czechoslovak Republic of 1918–1938 imported not only literary, but also musical and cinematic American artifacts. Based on this array of media, Czech tramps developed sophisticated recreational systems that included camps (*osady*), playful organizational hierarchy (with *šerifové* - sheriffs, and other honorary functionaries), as well as a wide array of costume possibilities that enabled participants to immerse themselves in the play.

In addition to dressing up as cowboys, Native Americans, or gold-prospectors, tramps also created a music-text world that amplified the tramping experience. *Trampské písně* allowed musical participants to evoke images and situations from the *osada* in other milieus, such as the theater stage and commercial sound recordings (Kotek: 158). The roots of Czech bluegrass lie in this process of evocation and musical celebration – most origin stories from bluegrassers start with a tramp singing and the musical activity that grew around it.

While the visual aspects of tramping are striking – with totem poles at tramp camps along the Sázava River south of Prague, cowboy hats and US military uniforms pervading Czech recreational attire, etc. – the musical and linguistic borrowing was also a significant part of tramp play and bluegrass projects that followed. Tramps have used pieces of English language to heighten the Americanness of their projects (the name of a cabin, of a tramp camp, characters in a song, etc.) Terms such as “kariboo” or “Klondike” have been potent signifiers of Americanness.

While English proficiency has increased since the end of Communist party’s primacy in 1989, many Czech bluegrassers are still not proficient enough in English to reasonably pronounce song names, much less to understand the verbal play and doubled meanings common in country music. During 2002–3, I observed that few bluegrassers were willing to converse with me in English, and even fewer were able to do so with proficiency. One common solution to the language gap is translation; most of the grass-roots-level Czech bluegrass activity is conducted entirely in Czech.

The jam session at the Country Saloon U Supa displayed the eclectic Americanist images common in tramp representations of *Amerika*: rough wood paneling, wagon wheel light fixtures, with Western ephemera on the walls. At the back of the main room was a long table looked over by portraits of US bluegrass luminaries like Bill Monroe and Flatt and Scruggs. The group

of men and women who met under this gaze on Tuesday evenings every week would gather in this Americanist atmosphere to play bluegrass, with a similarly Czech touch.

The first time I made my way from the #9 tram stop *Bertramka* up the gritty shadowed streets of Smíchov to get to U Supa, I wasn't sure that I wanted to keep going. Up the final steep stretch of Na Čechličce Street, I saw the sign "Country Club" and heard music float through the louvered swinging doors. I walked in and was directed by the bartender who, upon seeing my fiddle case, pointed me to a circle of musicians at the end of the left-hand wing of the L-shaped space.

When I brought out my fiddle and sat down at the jam table, I got a surprise: I was immersed in songs familiar from bluegrass jams and performances at home – all retexted into Czech. Zdeněk, a tram-driver for the city's transportation authority, always sat at the pub table with a fat 3-ring binder open amid the beer glasses in front of him, leading the singing and playing. In a pre-internet world, this collection of texts represented years of collection and editing – a trove of information useful for keeping the fun of the jam going. As the group would go from song to song, Zdeněk thus held a position of authority and prominence. He would clue me in to the original English title and composer of each song, often opening a discussion of important recorded performances of it by Czech and US artists, a liminal space indicating the transcultural mixing of bluegrass with Czech practices.

The Czech texts that this and many other groups use were the output of early bands such as the Greenhorns, White Stars, Rangers, Pavel Bobek, and others who were the first to encounter and reproduce American country and bluegrass in the 1960's and 1970's. In the several generations of musical transmission since these songs were hot pop commodities, there has been a wide dissemination of these songs (and their texts) throughout Czech musical life. One song that I was particularly struck by in 2002–3 was "Myslím na Colorado," a retexting of the Monroe/Carson classic "Cheap Love Affair" (Rosenberg and Wolfe 2007: 126). The song, which I heard countless times at U Supa, allows Czechs to sing with reference to iconic Americana: the place of Colorado (pronounced, following COP frontman Míša Leicht's lead, as "Coloraydo") and the sound of the "blues."

The playful grasp of *Amerika* in this and many other songs is a powerful suggestion, one that can inspire communal singing from not only the participating musicians at U Supa, but from individuals who are part of the normal

crowd at the bar or foosball machine. The world created in bluegrass' English lyrics is one that evokes nostalgic longing with its seemingly timeless landmarks like "mother", "home", and other rooted and rooting entities. As I continue to expand my fieldwork network, I learn of multiple text translations of standard bluegrass and country texts. The geographic nature of this textscape shows how Czech bluegrassers' tinkering with words has established a new territory in which to play and innovate. But what is the nature of this play space, and how far can textual play and innovation extend it? In the next section I consider clothing choices to illustrate some boundaries that emerge for Czech bluegrass playspaces.

### Putting on Bluegrass in Czech

...[I]t is a temporary activity satisfying in itself and ending there...Play is distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and duration...It is 'played out' within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning. Play begins, and then at a certain moment it is 'over'. It plays itself to an end (Huizinga 1955: 11).

This statement from Huizinga seems to clash with the Czech term "*životní styl*", or 'life/living style.' While the word "*styl*" might suggest that an Americanist musical project is a temporary mode one can put on or remove quickly, the term also points to habits of lifestyle which are more extensive. In my daily life while living in the Czech Republic, marks of Americanness lived outside of the bluegrass endeavor were reminders that this musical effort is a part of a larger phenomenon of appropriating the American "other" for a myriad of purposes. The "costume" of performers is just one layer of a multifaceted play with images of *Amerika* that are put on and off, yet which persist even when they are not worn.

The physically evident *životní styl* of Czechs in the bluegrass community (both audiences and performers) is as varied as that of the Czech landscape, but I was able to identify two major trends that are visible among performers on stage during the performances I observed in 2002–3: those, whose dress "style" emulated Americanness, and those who do not. The appearances of bands like Monogram and Reliéf (who dress in a street-style indistinguishable from any other person one might encounter in Prague) presents a distinct contrast to groups like Sunny Side and Bluegrass Cwrkot, who dress for their performances in suits, cowboy boots, string ties, Stetson-style hats, and other "western" or otherwise American-coded clothing.





Figure 1: Sunny Side and Bluegrass Cwrkot adopt what has become standard attire for classic-bluegrass oriented Czech bluegrassers: suits, ties, and cowboy hats.

One clue as to the motivations for the differences in dress is the nature of the music played, and the goals of the performers in their various endeavors. The bands that ‘dress up’ tend to perform more “classic” repertory, one that draws from the 1940’s U.S. bluegrass models of Bill Monroe and Flatt and Scruggs. Cwrkot’s 2004 disc “The Evening at the Old Rebel Pub” includes four original compositions by banjoist Milan Leppelt, with the remaining nine a mix of early bluegrass repertory. Sunny Side’s 2000 release “Tall Pines at the Old Home” is even more focused on core bluegrass repertory, with fourteen classic numbers with only one exception, a more recent gospel song attributed to Ricky Skaggs.

In costume and musical emulation, these groups deal with the history and the esthetic of the tramping movement. Indeed, Americanness in music and the *životní styl* of Czechs has been common since the early twentieth century – these bluegrassers are putting a new spin on a cultural practice of flamboyant Americanism with a long history.

Reliéf and Monogram do incorporate a healthy dose of emulation into their performance. The singing voice of Zbyněk Bureš, lead singer and bandleader of the top bluegrass band Reliéf, has a high-lonesome bluegrass sound: he navigates idiomatic vowels and diphthongs with ease. Jakub Racek of Monogram imitates James Taylor’s vocality with uncanny precision (Monogram, 2000). Although their music is almost entirely sung in English – and therefore for

the most part foreign to the Czech audience at large – they appear much more normal than the groups who use Americanist attire.

Reliéf's 2003 release "Suburban Street" represents their approach of creating bluegrass not as Czech Americanists. While this might on a superficial level make them seem more "Czech," this strategy simply indicates a different, updated Americanist practice. These bands "put on" identities, using more updated US models for their play instead of the typical Czech Americanist signifiers of *Amerika*.

The repertory on "Suburban Street" features nine original, English-language songs by lead singer Zbyněk Bureš, an instrumental by mandolinist Tomáš Dvořák, two covers of songs linked to experimental singer Tom Waits, and an *a cappella* gospel quartet classic by Cleavant Derricks. This pattern of self-authored and adapted songs differs from the approach by Cwrkot and Sunny Side, but is remarkably similar to that of Reliéf's US contemporaries, the Steep Canyon Rangers. The Rangers' 2005 release "One Dime at a Time" contains 8 original songs, a tune composed by banjoist Graham Sharp, and three covers, including Wade Mainer's gospel classic "I Can't Sit Down." Their 2007 disc "Lovin' Pretty Women" reinforces this distribution of songs, with the same structure as all three of these albums, with covers distributed through the original material, and the gospel tune squarely in the middle of the track list.

Reliéf's everyday clothes and their pose in a nondescript but clearly Czech cityscape could be read as signs of Czechness. However, comparisons with the Steep Canyon Rangers' publicity photography indicate that the Czech band has adopted the faded urbanity, street clothes, and even the frowning expressions that common among US bands in the early 2000s.

While they take on images, sound, and repertory similar to the standard of contemporary US bluegrass industry models in their media products, the members of Reliéf also work to localize their performances. During 2002–3 at their monthly performances at Malostranská Beseda, I observed how Reliéf's guitarist Jirka Holoubek acted as an interlocutor (a role called a *bavič* among Czech bluegrassers), filling gaps between English language songs with jokes and commentary that engages the crowd effectively – in Czech. Jirka's dance between Czech and English indicates how practically important it is to engage an audience in a language that they can understand – yet it also shows how central the dance between Czech and American is to Czech bluegrassers. Even when they downplay or carefully compartmentalize "Americanism", they still play with it.



Figure 2: Prague-based bluegrass group Reliéf's frowning faces and casual clothing present an image similar to that of North Carolina-based Steep Canyon Rangers as shown in a publicity photograph from ca. 2005.



My performances with the band Sunny Side through the winter of 2002 and the spring of 2003 led me to reconsider the stance of bands who used a more overtly Americanist costume. In preparation for my first public show with the band, Jirka lent me a vest, as I had dark pants and a white shirt that would work. I arrived at the club a bit earlier, anxious about the evening, about my ability to play up to Jirka's standard, to his speed! I had worn my "costume", thinking nothing of it. When the band members arrived, I was surprised: all of them were wearing 'normal' clothes, and carrying suit bags with their outfits. As they all changed in the green room, I noticed that the suits and shirts were well-worn, hard used from many costumed performances. I also noted that they were most certainly costumes. Whereas some people in Czech daily life do, indeed, have a "western" esthetic in their daily dress – I saw plenty of cowboy hats, boots, and large belt buckles on Prague's trams – these bluegrassers did not. They

did have an Americanist stage presence, but were otherwise unaffected by the “*životní styl*” that their music can sometimes entail. It seemed a tired ritual, to mount up in garb before heading out on stage, but the musicians did it for show after show every time I have seen them, without fail.

The visual image has become an essential part of Sunny Side’s self-presentation, with their faces and costumes signifying the content of the music, the location of the lyrics, and the style with which it will be delivered. Although the costume that they have chosen is a bit eclectic, it instantly speaks its purpose, to indicate Americanness – and with the unmistakable white face of the banjo in the picture, there is nothing else it could be but bluegrass. Huizinga portrays the solidifying through repetition that play fosters:

...it at once assumes fixed form as a cultural phenomenon. Once played, it endures as a new-found creation of the mind, a treasure to be retained by the memory. It is transmitted, it becomes tradition. It can be repeated at any time ... In nearly all the higher forms of play the elements of repetition and alternation (as in the *refrain*), are like the warp and woof of a fabric (Huizinga 1955: 9–10).

Just as the early songs of the Czech bluegrass pioneers have become a body of common knowledge that joins together many in the Czech communities I observed, Sunny Side have become an institution in their own right as performers of “traditional bluegrass” in Czech circles. The album this group was selling in 2002 when I played with them inscribed a new circle of “tradition” – it is a collection of songs by the Greenhorns, a tribute but also a commercial venture – and a successful one (Sunny Side, 2001). These songs were often requested in the parts of performances when audience input in song choice was integrated into the band’s typical audience-participation games. This is another “tradition” that they reproduce with good effect: Pavel Handlík’s vocal emulation of Greenhorns singer Honza Vyčítal is as compelling as his performances that evoke Bill Monroe or Charlie Waller. The performances that reference the Greenhorns use a musical aesthetic that Sunny Side have mastered in bluegrass to convey, instead of Americanness, something more overtly Czech.

On the spectrum that runs between “American” and “Czech” identity extremes, their “Greenhorns” album is the only one they have published with Czech lyrics, or any artistically articulated “Czechness” at all. This deviation from their American traditionalist program is an example of recent formal/generic improvisation, similar to the ways that Jirka Holoubek spins

an impromptu Czech frame around Reliéf's English-language bluegrass. Many Czechs adapt their version of bluegrass music-making to improvise within the ritualized standard of tradition.

## Enriching / Improvising within Rituals

Taking part in the jam at U Supa, I sensed aspects of ritual, especially in the regularity of its setup and in the devotion of participants. I sensed that this jam was not a good place to observe how the construction of bluegrass music-making in the Czech Republic happens, as at the jam, people were focused on performing and socializing, not on learning. Huizinga warns, "Tricky questions such as these will come up for discussion when we start examining the relationship between play and ritual" (Huizinga 1955: 8). How, indeed, do Czechs playfully make the rituals of bluegrass their own? Margaret Drewal adds dimension to the tricky nature of ritual "in play":

Practitioners ... are aware that when ritual becomes static, when it ceases to adjust and adapt, it becomes obsolete, empty of meaning, and eventually dies out. They often express the need to modify rituals to address current social conditions (Drewal 1992: 8).

Spending Easter weekend with the twenty-or-so other "students" at the *Lhotka u Telče* bluegrass workshop, I observed more ways that Czech bluegrassers cultivate a flexibly changing tradition. Czech bluegrass, as I observed it in that spring of 2003, was a process of transmission characterized by a careful balance of innovation and tradition, within a constant flow of media. The various playspaces that participants constructed and honed during this event showed a variety of approaches and esthetic values, but all were in motion, developing and changing.

The principal part of the workshop was the transmission of the practices of instrumental, vocal, and theatrical performance. Students had paid two thousand Czech crowns (around 100 USD at the time) to learn from members of the band Reliéf, with help from banjoist Zdeněk Roh, and Dutch bluegrass polymath and Czech resident Ralph Schut. The long holiday weekend included breakout classes for specific instruments (I joined the mandolin class); in larger sessions, the whole group learned about vocal harmonizing, microphone setup, songwriting, and other issues that come up in bluegrass performance.

At the workshop, I got to see beginners under the tutelage of Czech bluegrass experts. In their interactions I observed – and was taught – what was most valued by these experienced musicians – what they felt was important enough to impress on their students. The tension between the written or received tradition and the necessary flexibility of individual expression seemed ever-present. The music’s nature as a flexible and personally-grounded performance medium was emphasized at many points, even as a strict adherence to norms of sound production, song form, and group dynamics was enforced. I felt in my own musicality the challenge to maintain the enlivening flux of the music even as I crystallize it into a standard, durable entity that I can hold on to, keep for the future, and share with others with compatible musicalities. At the *Lhotka* workshop and elsewhere, I came across many examples that reveal this tension at play.

The continuous change effected within the music through composition was one aspect of the music I observed. Composition of a traditional sort, as Tomáš Dvořák demonstrated in our mandolin workshop session, was a large part of his preparation for performance. As Tomáš showed us, the formulaic composition that he uses in the construction of his mandolin solos is one that employs individual creation. He handed out notated versions of tunes and songs and then talked to us about what we could do to the written notes in creating our own version. He demonstrated a slide that joins the first few notes of the Monroe tune “Big Mon”, saying that this was an example of making it *bohatší*, “richer”, that this kind of ornament adds *něco navíc*, “something more” to the bare bones of the tune as he has written it out on staff paper for us.

I also realized the importance of the infrastructure and media to the learning and adaptation of bluegrass in a Czech context. One afternoon towards the end of the workshop, a local organizer hauled a photocopy machine to the rural workshop site in the bed of his truck. Despite the importance of face-to-face transmission at the workshop, that copier was almost continuously in use for the whole afternoon as students furiously copied tablatures, songbooks, and technique tutors made available by the staff – expanding their bluegrass libraries, and spreading further more integral parts of the music’s repertory and performance. At this same workshop in 2008, I saw people making similar exchanges with more advanced technology: laptops and multi-gigabyte hard drives full of sound recordings and other media.

Back at Prague after the 2003 workshop, I reflected on this tension of traditions/innovations, and the effort to enrich a performance. My work with Sunny

Side revealed a similar desire to enrich performance. Jirka Králík proposed that we play some tunes in a “double fiddle” style, following the model set by Bill Monroe and other early bluegrass performers. He used the same adjective to describe the benefits of adding another fiddle to Sunny Side’s sound: *bohatší*. With this new element, the performance would be richer and more satisfying for us as performers, and more rich an experience for the observing audience. There would be the innovation of a new element, but also a rooting of the practice in established bluegrass practice.

‘Enriching’ the performance is not always a pre-determined effort. For my first ‘double-fiddle’ performance with Sunny Side at club CI-5, I joined the band for the first set and we played all the songs that Jirka and I had rehearsed and worked out duet parts for. During the intermission, I was packing up my instrument, when banjoist Zbyněk Podskalský asked me what I was doing: “*Co děláš?*” He indicated that I should come back to join them for the second set. Jirka and I looked at each other, shrugged, and ad-libbed the rest of the performance in various ways – improvising duo figures and whole instrumental verses, passing off accompanying lines and solo breaks. It was exhilarating, risky, and though not perfect, was an enlivening point of excitement for the band as we performed, and for an audience that knew it was seeing something on the edge of its creation. As Drewal points out in discussing ritual and change, “(s)ometimes change is the result of long deliberations, oftentimes it is more spontaneous” (Drewal 1992: 8).

One other source of excitement at CI-5 that evening was...me – an American fiddler was on stage. Though I was disguised in Czech Americanist costume, I was still “Lee ze Severní Karoliny,” someone with a connection to the real United States. Czech innovations could enrich a bluegrass performance, but I sensed that for these folks at CI-5, I might have the connoisseurship to authenticate or validate it. This made me uncomfortable, on reflection. As I refined my approach to fieldwork in 2002–3, then, I wrestled with the fact that I could not apprentice myself to a master musician in the traditional ethnomusicologist model of “bimusicality” (Hood: 1960). I realized that I could most effectively study not the way that Czechs played the music as such, but how they created the space and community that would enable the larger play of bluegrass. Whether in a cowboy hat or cosmopolitan dress, playing at a high level or just beginning, bluegrassers cooperated in making the music work in a Czech context. How could I pose my fieldwork to understand this play without somehow disturbing the playspace?

## Ruining Play with Work / Outlining It as Play

...it creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it 'spoils the game', robs it of its character and makes it worthless (Huizinga 1955: 10).

In exploring the possible deformations of play, Huizinga distinguishes "spoilsports" and "cheats" (Huizinga 1955: 11). A spoilsport ruins play by denouncing its validity, revealing its un-reality. The cheat actually reinforces what Huizinga calls the "magic circle" of the game by attempting to get ahead, pretending to play the game within its rules while bringing in exterior (non-play) elements that further play goals. I have not been able to name any instances of "cheating" in the play of this music.

There don't seem to be a lot of Czechs who spoil the "game," either. People not in the community of "players" in the ČR tended, in my observations, to regard it with neutrality or, at worst, with an ambivalent disregard. People don't seem to go out of their way to question the performances or motives (and the play) of Czech bluegrassers.

Except for me: I was the only one there who was posing questions, trying to find out what was going on. I was questioning the existence of the music and its community. What would drive someone to do that? This essay itself is a possible spoiling of the unquestioned functioning of this music's undisturbed play. I feel the spoiling process going on most strongly when I play recordings of my Czech friends to musicians and others, especially in the U.S. The reaction is one of disbelief, amazement, and often amusement. Even with knowledge of the cultural context and my strong relationships with many of the musicians involved, the sounds themselves still clash with US bluegrass performances, and can sound skewed or distorted (especially voices and texts). When does a music lose its ties and begin to create new ones that connect it to other people, places, things and encompasses a new world of creative play?

At a performance by Reliéf in Prague during fieldwork in 2008, Jirka Holoubek introduced me onstage, telling the audience about my background and history in the Czech Republic, and called me to the microphone to explain *why* I was in Prague, and what exactly I was doing for my "work".<sup>1</sup> He didn't press

---

<sup>1</sup> He used the word *práce*, a word that in Czech can refer to employment, or a specific "work," such as a *disertační práce*, or "dissertation".)



the issue all that long, but did get all of us laughing about the fact that I was there that evening *pracovně* (“workingly”) while playing the fiddle. Moments such as these indicate that Czech bluegrassers *know* the play they are engaged in, and that they accept the oddness that my work is based in our shared musical play just as they do the persisting, distinct, and somewhat unusual Czechness of their Americanist performances.

During the years since I entered the Czech bluegrass world in 2002, I have had many chances to continue in the play and work of my fieldwork, both at home in the US and while traveling. One of the aspects of Czech bluegrass work and play that continues to intrigue me is the Czech production of bluegrass musical instruments. While I still haven’t saved up enough money to buy one personally, I see that a growing trade in Czech instruments has become a major way that these two worlds of bluegrass that I know separately are becoming more connected. Czech luthiers produce instruments that rival bluegrass banjos and mandolins made in the United States – at lower cost and with a unique European cachet.

Names such as Čapek, Prucha, and Krishot adorn the pegheads of these instruments, bringing a trace of Czechness into US musical practice. These musical objects serve, in a way more concrete than Reliéf’s album packaging, as a reproduction of bluegrass norms in the United States, one that is validated by US consumption. Czechs have found ways that their bluegrass experience and efforts can profit them in very tangible ways – yet also validate their play. Instead of ruining the game, then, this particular form of bluegrass-related work has provided more ways for play to thrive.

## **The Ambiguity of Play**

Sunny Side’s 1998 album “Lonesome Station” has a subtitle, “In Czech Canada” printed at the bottom of the liner notes’ cover, below a photo of the band in costume standing next to a railroad siding labeled with a “Lonesome Station” placard. They refer to the nickname of a protected natural region southeast from Prague, a popular recreational destination since the 1920s. Sunny Side’s members place themselves within the Czech landscape, and within the history of the land as an imaginary playspace. The play crosses boundaries between real and imaginary, between the Czech trees and railroad ties and the cowboy boots and banjo that accompany bluegrass music making, opening spaces that can be both Czech and *not* Czech at the same

time. A playful sense of humor, I have found, underlies this paradox, easing the tension that it embodies.

Like bluegrassers returning home from the U Supa jam, or from the Lhotka bluegrass workshop, the members of Sunny Side know that they are not in Canada. Their earnest and devoted costumes and CD packaging show traces of self-deprecating humor that is play within that play, in language, thought, and action. In humor, the contradictions of play are resolved as things are meant to be other than they seem. While Huizinga's conception of play hints in numerous places at flexibility, scholars have more recently developed the ambiguous aspect of play:

Geoffrey Bateson (1955) ... suggests that play is a paradox because it both is and is not what it appears to be. Animals at play bite each other playfully, knowing that the playful nip connotes a bite, but not what a bite connotes. In turn, Richard Schechner (1988) ... suggests that a playful nip is not only not a bite, it is also *not* not a bite. That is, it is a positive, the sum of two negatives. Which is again to say that the playful nip may not be a bite, but it is indeed what a bite means (Sutton-Smith 1997: 1).

The ambiguity of play, as Brian Sutton-Smith here suggests, is its ability to suggest, invoke, warn, or entice through creating territories that are distinct from the non-play world even as they effect real change in that world. The bluegrassers' assertion of Americanness within Czech society seems similar to the meaning-laden nips of animals at play, while an "actual bite" suggests *actual* Americanness.

My presence as an observing, participating ethnographer – who is also a U.S. citizen – adds new elements to the play in which Czech bluegrassers assert American-ness. I have taken part *pracovně* and playfully, knowing that what I wear or sing as an adopted Czech bluegrassers connotes Americanness, but not always invoking everything that Americanness or Czechness connotes. The Schechnerian model seems more applicable to this discussion driven with paradoxes: Czech bluegrass is not only not an actual Americanness, it is also *not* not a real expression of something from the United States. As the sum of two negatives (not American yet also *not* not American), Czech bluegrassers' playful representation of Americanness deals with imagination, but also with reality – making it, I conclude, an ideal way of dealing with social change. Bren (2002) and Reidinger (2007) both link tramping and cottaging to political concerns

and movements present in the Czech lands since before 1900, posing them – as I pose bluegrass play – as serious responses to social change.

Indeed, the changes in the past half-century are dramatic. Since 1965, Czechs saw a thaw in socialist control, normalization, the changes of 1989, a split with Slovakia, and entrance into the European Union in 2004. Bluegrassers have seen similar change in these five decades; 1965 marks the beginning of banjoist Marko Čermák's career with the five-stringed banjo (Cermak 2010: 55), the first weekend-long bluegrass festival in the US state of Virginia (Rosenberg 2005: 205–212), and other watershed moments for this music as it has become a global form of work and play.

Czechs' play in bluegrass illustrates a particular creativity in dealing with both local and global issues. As a form of recreation during the Communist party primacy, Americanism provided tramps and other participants with an ambiguously dissident form of expression. After 1989, the ambiguity of Czech bluegrass play continues. While I detect in some bluegrass projects a political support for various political or social views connected with the United States (for instance, flying the Confederate States of America's "rebel flag"), more often I sense that Americanism has become a distinct way of being Czech. Geographer Petr Jehlička describes some forms of post-1989 Americanism as social alternatives ... "to the dominant individualistic and consumerist culture" (Jehlička 2008: 128). The bites and nips of bluegrass play that I discuss in this essay thus are both local and global, becoming responses to the encroachment of Americanization in economic and cultural globalization, but also a way of being "Americanist" and entirely Czech.

**Lee Bidgood**, PhD, is an ethnomusicologist and musician who works and plays in bluegrass and other US string band forms. His research interests include early music, boundary crossings in popular music between Czech-American, sacred-secular, and (in US racial discourse) white-black. He is Assistant Professor in the Department of Appalachian Studies at East Tennessee State University.

## References

- Ackerman, Diane. 2000. *Deep Play*. New York: Vintage.
- Bren, Paulina. 2002. "Weekend Getaways: The *Chata*, the *Tramp* and the Politics of Private Life in Post- 1968 Czechoslovakia." Pp. 123–140 in Crowley, David, and Susan E. Reed (eds.). *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*. Oxford: Berg.

- De Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1990. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Čermák, Marko. 2010. *Poslední romantik*. Praha: Václav Vávra.
- Drewal, Margaret Thompson. 1992. *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hood, Mantle. 1960. "The Challenge of "Bi-Musicality." *Ethnomusicology*, 4 (2): 55–59.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1955. *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hurikan, Bob. 1940. *Dějiny trampingu*. Praha: Novinář.
- Jehlicka, Petr. 2008. "Indians of Bohemia: the spell of woodcraft on Czech society 1912–2006." Pp. 112–130 in Blecking, Diethelm and Marek Waic (eds.). *Sport – Ethnie – Nation: Zur Geschichte und Soziologie des Sports in Nationalitätenkonflikten und bei Minoritäten*. Baltmannsweiler: Schneider Verlag Hohengehren.
- Jehlička, Petr, and Matthew Kurtz. 2013. "Everyday Resistance in the Czech Landscape: The Woodcraft Culture from the Hapsburg Empire to the Communist Regime." *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, 27 (2): 308–322.
- Kotek, Josef. 1995. "Lidovka a trampská píseň meziválečného období." *Hudební věda*, 32 (2): 158–181.
- Pohůnek, Jan. 2011. "A Century of Czech Tramping." *Folklorica*, 16: 19–41.
- Reidinger, Melinda. 2007. *Islands of Bourgeois Self-Realization in a Sea of Change: A Century of Czech Cottaging*. PhD. Dissertation, University of Virginia.
- Rosenberg, Neil. 2005. *Bluegrass: A History*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Rosenberg, Neil, and Charles Wolfe. 2007. *The Music of Bill Monroe*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Sammons, Jeffrey L. 1998. *Ideology, Mimesis, Fantasy: Charles Sealsfield, Friedrich Gerstäcker, Karl May and Other German Novelists of America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Skrobáková, Eva. 2002. *Bluegrass*. Diplomová práce. Brno: Masarykova univerzita. Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky.
- Symonds, James, and Pavel Vareka. "Cowboys and Bohemians: Recreation, Resistance, and the Tramping Movement in West Bohemia." *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology*, 1 (1): 165–193.
- Sutton-Smith, Brian. 1997. *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

### ***Discography***

- Cop. Cop. Presston, 1993.
- Monogram. *Siesta*. Recorded at Good Day Records Studio, Prague, Czech Republic, 2000.
- Reliéf. *Suburban Street*. Produced by Jiří Mašek and Good Day Records, 2002.
- Sunny Side. *Lonesome Station (in Czech Canada)*. Recorded in studio Macac, Ústí nad Labem, Czech Republic, 1998.

Sunny Side. *Tall Pines at the Old Home*. in studio Macac, Ústi nad Labem, Czech Republic, 2000.

Sunny Side. *Hity Starých Greenhornů Hraje Sunny Side [Sunny Side plays the greatest hits of the Old Greenhorns]*. Recorded in studio Macac, Ústi nad Labem, Czech Republic, 2001.

### ***Acknowledgements***

The generous support of a Fulbright IIE grant supported me during that research year of 2002–3. For their patience, for all the experiences and words, guidance and suggestions, notes, jams, and tunes many thanks to all the following who helped me through the field work and play in this article: to Irena Pribylová and Zuzana Jurková (and their respective universities – MU and UK); to all at the Czech Fulbright Commission; to Zdeněk Roh and all of Roll’s Boys (Vít Piskač, Jirka Hebký, Aleš Weselý, and Ralph Schut); to Jirka Králík and the rest of Sunny Side (Pavel Handlík, Zbyněk Podskalský, Mirek Prokop, and Radim Duda); to Reliéf (Zbyněk Bureš, Pavel Peroutka, Tomáš Dvořák, and Jiří Holoubek); to all my fellow “students” at the Lhotka *bluegrassová dílna* workshop; and to the folks at *U Supa* (Ivo Drbohlav, Mira, Tomáš Tichý, Zdeněk, Věra, Mírek, Karel, Slávek), and to all the rest.