

PERFORMING RACE(D) MUSIC IN CENTRAL EUROPE: CAN BLUEGRASS BE “ETHNICALLY CZECH”?

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Abstract: The 1993 Česko-Slovenský split was the latest step in the formation of today's nearly mono-ethnic Czech nation-state, a culturally homogeneous milieu where ethnicity blurs with citizenship, and outsiders are not always welcomed. As a phenotypically “white” scholar engaged in participatory observation of Czech performance of bluegrass music, I feel the power of music to forge identity in this exclusive environment: my “Americanness” both endears me to and distances me from my Czech colleagues and the life of their communities.

Bluegrass's foundations in U.S. minstrelsy, its connections with pro-Anglo rhetoric, and its troubling “whiteness” in sound and effect give me pause as I consider how bluegrass musical practices are reproduced in the Czech Republic. Bluegrassers perform repertory and style that is part of the Afro-American musical tension: enhanced by cultural hybridity, but also complicated by legacies of identity and power. How do Czechs process the American black / white tension when they recreate its sounds within very different demographic and socio-historical conditions?

The appearance of the Confederate battle or “rebel” flag and controversial repertory in Czech bluegrass is less important in this discussion than group dynamics and discourse that evoke many of the unmarked categories outlined in current American “whiteness” literature. The “minority” rhetoric voiced by Czechs as a small part of the European conglomerate, and as members of the local bluegrass subculture clash with their de facto majority status within the bounds of the Czech state and within the bluegrass community. By describing some of the groups and events I have observed this year in the Czech Republic, I will give a sense of the “Czechness” that is built into Czech performances of country and bluegrass, and discuss the implications of these intersections of music, identity, and performance.

Key words: *bluegrass, ethnicity.*

Bluegrass is a country music subgenre innovated in the Southern United States by Bill Monroe and other musicians in the mid-20th century. Through a variety of interesting twists, music-making informed by U.S. bluegrass has been going on in the Czech lands for over a half century, nearly as long as it has in the US. The prehistory of Czech bluegrass activity lies in the Central European affinity for representations of America, especially of wilderness, the “Wild West” as described by Karl May and Jack London, the woodcraft detailed by Baden-Powell and Thompson-Seton, and the rambling idylls of Thoreau. The so-called *tramping* movement of the early 1900s grew out of images of adventure drawn from these writers, the vaudeville-esque music theater of the *Osvobozené Divadlo* of Werich and Voskovec, and the visual spark of western films such as those starring Tom Mix. (Kotek 106-7)

The associated genre of “tramp songs” soon followed. Tramping’s musicians, already equipped with a string band instrumentation (guitars, mandolins, etc.), eagerly incorporated US country and bluegrass when US Armed Forces Network broadcasts first brought these sounds to Central European airwaves after the second World War.

Today bluegrass and country music elements are widespread in the Czech Republic. The Bluegrassova Asociace České Republiky lists nearly 200 groups on their website, Prague’s *Country Radio* broadcasts nearly everywhere, and most small towns host events called “*country baly*” which feature songs and dancing that would be familiar to bluegrass fans in the States.

Amidst this variety of interpretations of “America” and country music, there are a wide range of interpretations of bluegrass and many derivative labels, such as “trampgrass,” “Czechgrass,” “Second Grass,” “Newgrass,” etc. My dissertation research is focused on Czechs who are most intensely working at recreating a traditional bluegrass style. Bluegrass Cvrkot is a good example – they wear suits, string ties, and cowboy hats, and they stick to repertory taken from bluegrass old-timers Bill Monroe and Flatt and Scruggs.

Traditionalist bluegrass, more than any of the constellation of bluegrass-related expressions, is based on the “good old days,” and on a few “good old boys” who created the “bluegrass” sound and concept in the 1950s as a way of celebrating a rural, and sometimes overtly “Anglo” music heritage in the face of rock and roll, Rhythm and Blues, and other more progressive and racially charged sounds.

A reverence for the first generation of bluegrass players, as well as the style and repertory they created, haunts bluegrass today—even in the Czech

Republic. One of Cwrkot's "hits" is a newly composed homage to Bill Monroe, a native of Rosine, Kentucky, and the self-acclaimed "Father of Bluegrass."

A large photo of Monroe hangs over the stage at the hospoda "U Starého Rebela" in Sloupnice, East Bohemia. The Old Rebel Pub is owned by BG Cwrkot bassist Pavel Brandejs, and is the "home base" of the band – they host bluegrass evenings once a month, and other events. I attended a concert there two weeks ago and was struck by the decor and ambience. It was a normal Czech pub in many ways, but along with weathered artifacts of rural life and bygone days, the walls were covered with photos of bluegrass and country stars: Hank Williams, Jimmy Martin, Flatt and Scruggs – the whole pantheon. Instead of a football match, before the concert started, a DVD called "Gospel Bluegrass Homecoming" poured Ricky Skaggs's sweet and sacred harmonies over the bar into the smoky room.

Another recurring item on the walls was connected to the name of the pub. The "Rebel flag," a relic of the Confederate States of America, is an emblem of white, Southern pride in the US today. Despite, or perhaps because of, the controversy, it still appears all over: T-shirts, bumper stickers, flying over caravans at bluegrass festivals, even. While the implications of this particular sign are a bit mixed in the Czech context, the problem of "whiteness" does pop up here.

As a recent article by Allen Farmelo points out, many narratives pose bluegrass as some sort of "traditional music of **white** people in the US." Farmelo describes a more complicated history, showing bluegrass to be a 20th century representation of cultural interaction over hundreds of years between black and white Americans. The exclusion of African-Americans from narratives about string band music in the United States, Farmelo contends, is part of the pattern of Anglo-American hegemony. David Whisnant (1985) and Gavin Campbell's (2005) work provides extensive case studies which illustrate specific ways that American string band music has been used by European-Americans to further their race-based ideologies. Despite their critical work, though, bluegrass in the US continues to be a solidly "white" scene.

So what about whiteness in Czech bluegrass? Does the ethnic homogeneity of "white" – "native Czech" – Czech bluegrassers have anything to do with the racial politics of the United States? Have Czechs adopted not only the musical materials, but some of the cultural practices of bluegrass and the American South? The nationalist, racist undercurrent in Czech society is a definite presence, but I don't think the BG Cwrkot and the rest of the scene are necessarily part of that stream.

BG Cwrkot were guests of honor at the weekend bluegrass workshop in Nové Svatoňovice in the fall of 2007. At the climactic Saturday night concert, bassist and bandleader Pavel “Brandy” Brandejs introduced the fiddle player, who smiled shyly in the shadow of his broad-brimmed and western-ish hat:

*Nejmladším se mnou hrající člověkem je
pan kterej je z Mladé Boleslavi
hraje se mnou teprve rok
kdo je tady na housle
tak by ho rád vycitil s tím
že se mnou hraje na housle rok,
a na housle vůbec hraje rok a půl.*

[smích]

má to v krvi
z Mladé Boleslavi
DAVID KOUCKÝ!

*The youngest person playing with me is
a man from Mladá Boleslav
he’s playing with me now for a year
those who are here studying fiddle
will be interested to know that
he’s been playing fiddle with me a year,
and has only been playing fiddle for a year and a half*

[laughing]

he’s got it in his blood
from Mladá Boleslav
DAVID KOUCKÝ!

[Author’s field recording, and translation]

What is it he’s got in his blood? Why do I put these words in bold? If you saw David, you’d know why. The buzz around David (I still haven’t been able to land an interview to get better information) is that he is a Rom, a Gypsy – part of a group that has endured a deeply marginalized position in Czech history for centuries.

Back to my original question: what is in his blood? After this introduction, David went on to fiddle a hot version of the bluegrass classic “Back Up and Push,” displaying a rough virtuosity that garnered fierce applause from the audience. What sort of “blood” would contribute to this sort of playing? Is it Roma-ness? Otherness? Is it ... Bluegrass?

I’m not sure how to take Brandy’s comment, and am even more “not sure” how to take up this issue with David when I meet with him, as I hope to do. “So...you are a Romani musician involved in bluegrass. How does that work? Do you feel there is racism directed at you? Do you feel kinship to African-American people, musicians, musical practices?” etc. etc. Just thinking about it is disorienting, and reminds me what a different situation I work within here in the Czech Republic, how the race/ethnicity problems of the United States are somehow part of culture here, but are not the only dynamic at play.

One avenue for understanding his position, though, is to imagine how I share some part of his “otherness.” I can’t help remarking on the parallel between myself and David: We both are set apart in some way due to some sort of birthright that we claim through genetics. In the Czech Republic I am often – in fact, almost always – introduced on stage with phrases similar to those we just heard. I am often presented as “*Lee z Ameriky*,” which is a rhymed reminder that I can be reified, essentialized as a figure of “American-ness” in the same way that David is enclosed by the discourse of ethnicity.

I realize the limits of this line of thinking, however. Unlike David, I can slip into a crowd and not be visibly different from the rest of the “white” folks around. I’m usually marked only by my voice – while sometimes I can pass linguistically, my stumbling Czech or my practiced English usually give me away.

My fiddle playing also gets comments. Two of the top fiddlers in the bluegrass scene here are Pepa Malina and Stano Paluch, both accomplished musicians with conservatory backgrounds and experience in a variety of musical settings. At a bluegrass workshop outside of Brno in 2005, we were sitting around playing bluegrass fiddle tunes and talking. The specifics have left me, but I still remember being surprised at how these great musicians both said that they feel as if they aren’t very good fiddlers, that they don’t play this music the way they would like – using ME as an example of someone who is able to play it well, emphasizing especially the rhythmic feel they noticed in my right hand, in my bowing.

Another very able (and conservatory-trained) fiddler, Jirka Králík, stopped me cold as I sat with him playing fiddle tunes this past October. I had just

played the opening phrase of the tune “Red Haired Boy,” a standard fiddle tune in bluegrass circles. He stopped me, excited: “WAIT! How’d you play that?” We worked over what I had played, and came up with the diagnosis – I was using a bluesy/modal/pentatonic/scale instead of a “normal” major tonal framework, slipping in a G instead of the F# usually found in the first phrase of the tune.

These musical elements are stereotypically “black” – a problematic observation, but one that, like Philip Tagg’s analysis (1989) of this sort of characterization, leaves some room for discussion about “racial” identifications and musical style. Interestingly enough, the characteristics I remarked on above remind me of David Koucký’s fiddling style, which, like mine, is rougher, less controlled than Pepa’s and Jirka’s polished finesse. We are both outsiders in a way, but both incorporated into the Czech bluegrass scene. I won’t push the parallel too far, but will just say that for all its exclusivity and prickliness, bluegrass, even in its Czech forms, incorporates difference in ways that continue to surprise me.

Joti Rockwell’s recent dissertation considers bluegrass as it is constructed by people who perform and consume the music. Rockwell proposes that bluegrass activity is a constellation of individuals in discourse around the central trope, spinning out variations, but maintaining a connection to the core – a typical illustration of flexible, developing tradition. Concluding a section where he describes how much bluegrassers argue about what, in fact, bluegrass itself IS, he says that “as long as the debate continues, people continue listening, and as long as people continue listening, performers continue producing the music under discussion. The debate, then, is an important reason why the genre is alive and can continue to be sustained.” (Rockwell 2005, 101)

The concept of tropes is encouraging to me – seeing Czech performances of bluegrass as part of the negotiation of tropes rather than the successful or unsuccessful reproduction of a specific prescriptive genre regime allows for the sort of alternative narratives that Farmelo seeks in redressing Bluegrass historiography. A tropological understanding of bluegrass more readily accepts the sort of narratives about bluegrass that I come across here in Czech Republic – whether it be my stories as a scholar and player, or the ones that David Koucký or his bandmates in BG Cwrkot have to tell. More importantly, understanding bluegrass as a trope poses all of us as active agents in a discourse, as people who are engaged in negotiation of what bluegrass *is*, not subjects of an abstract idea of genre. That’s music, not only to my ears, but also to my conscience.

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