

**A Music of Survival:
The Prague Jazz Scene and Dissent in Communist Czechoslovakia**

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Introduction

Emil Viklický had a decision to make.¹ It was May of 1978, and he was 30 years old living in New York City, playing jazz piano to pay his rent on an apartment on Reade Street, above an old mirror shop. Viklický had just graduated from Berklee College of Music, which he had attended on a scholarship he earned while playing the jazz scene in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Now, he had a wife at home in Prague. His student visa was about to expire, and if he stayed in New York, he could not return home. Other Czech musicians faced the same dilemma around this time. Most famous was George Mraz, a bassist in Thad Jones's Orchestra at the time, who had decided to defect from Czechoslovakia to pursue his music in the United States. Mraz offered Viklický a job in the band, which played at the Village Vanguard every Monday night. Mraz promised, "We'll keep you busy."

Emil instead decided to return home that summer. He wanted to be with his wife, and he was already an established young talent on the Prague scene. His homecoming would set off a successful career playing with the biggest Czech names and touring American talent. An interviewer in 2011 asked Viklický if he regretted his decision to return home. "Yeah," he paused, "but what can I do? What can help you if you regret? It doesn't help you anything."²

Viklický was born in November 1948, just nine months after the coup in Czechoslovakia that brought Communists to power. The new government brought along with it a reordering of Czech society, from political mobilization to infrastructure, economy, and culture.³ He returned,

¹ Refer to the Appendix for links to music and artists referenced in the text.

² Emil Viklický, "Jazz Legend Emil Viklický," Radio Prague International, 9:38, 16 December 2011.

³ For specifics on the Stalinist cultural revolution in Czechoslovakia, see Melissa Feinberg, "Creating a Stalinist Society" in *Communism in Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2021): 37-64.

then, to a Prague that had undergone this Sovietization for thirty years. The city, and the arts scene particularly, was a tangled web of various Soviet values, Czech sensibilities, and imported culture.

Soviet ideology bound politics and aesthetics together in socialist realism, a political-artistic movement that valued the depiction of communist ideals—the power of the proletariat, political optimism, and ideological clarity.⁴ The remnants of this art is still visible on a few building façades in Prague today: images of chiseled men holding tools and scientific instruments, strong and straight lines, an idealized realism of the human form, scenes of national hope and resoluteness, always focused on the proletariat. This new artistic ethic was the same in new Soviet music—a return to Slavic folk traditions and a sense of national optimism. Under Stalin, Soviet officials commissioned classical music that was familiar, easily accessible to the masses, and anti-formalist.⁵ The movement was a foundational to Lenin’s cultural revolution, which sought to “fill every nook and cranny with the Bolshevik ideological substance.”⁶ This project, begun just after the Russian Revolution, only intensified under Josef Stalin. The Stalin years, from his rise to power in 1924 until his death in 1953, introduced the “expectation of absolute unity and cohesion” in politics, society, and culture.⁷ The art of socialist realism reflected this (aspirational) cohesion. According to Marxist theory, the main product of socialist

⁴ Aesthetics, the principles concerned with beauty and art, was a cornerstone of the Marxist revolutionary vision. For more on the theories of Marxist aesthetics, see Edward M. Swiderski, “Options for a Marxist-Leninist Theory of the Aesthetic,” *Studies in Soviet Thought* 20, no. 2 (1979): 127-43.

⁵ For more on the music of socialist realism, Shostakovich, Khachaturian, and others, see James Bakst, *A History of Russian-Soviet Music* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1966).

⁶); Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 454

⁷ *Ibid.*, 469.

realism is socialism itself.⁸ It is an artform entirely in service of ideology.

Jazz fit oddly within the socialist realism ethic. On the one hand, it was the music of an oppressed people—Black Americans living under Jim Crow. Likewise, Black jazz musicians sometimes had a fellow-traveler mentality toward the Soviet Union. Many American jazz musicians spoke admiringly of the socialist ethos as an alternative to American capitalism, even if they did not call themselves Communists. Some even planned to move to the Soviet Bloc after their playing careers ended.⁹ Therefore, the genre was, from its earliest years, understood by Soviets as part of the same liberation struggle that socialist realism claimed to propel.¹⁰ On the other hand, the genre—especially in post-World War II Soviet Union—was representative of improper improvisation, dissonance, and disorder, hallmarks of the decadent West. Jazz, then, was in turn censored, venerated, and denigrated during the Stalin years based on various winds of political and aesthetic change that swept through. By the 1950s, the genre had existed both legally and illegally in Soviet music scenes for several decades.¹¹

Of course, Soviet policies were not uniform across the bloc. Czechoslovakia had a particularly volatile shift from pre-Soviet modernist aesthetics to post-1948 art and culture. Prague has a long history of situating itself as a home for high culture, especially that dictated by

⁸ Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, trans. Jesse M. Savage (New Haven, C.T.: Yale University Press, 2007), 6-7.

⁹ Art Taylor, *Notes and Tones: Musician-to-Musician Interviews* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Yvetta Kajanova, “Introduction” in *Jazz from Socialist Realism to Postmodernism*, ed. Yvetta Kajanova, Gertrud Pickhan, Rüdiger Ritter (Frankfurt: Peter Lang Editions, 2016), 9-10.

¹¹ For more on the various policies toward jazz and American popular music in the Soviet Union, see: Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Stites argues that the “red jazz age” of 1932-1936 cemented the genre as a sign of cultural progress, which ended with a violent crackdown on jazz musicians in 1936. These few-year cycles of acceptance and illegality defined Stalinist music policies until Stalin’s death in 1953.

Western Europe.¹² After the introduction of Communist rule in Czechoslovakia after World War II, Czech artists and politicians alike grappled with balancing a preoccupation for high culture with a new vision of proletariat internationalism.¹³ With the end of a flourishing Czech modernist scene and the introduction of a political-aesthetic unifying theory, the city's artists were caught in the shifting winds. Several decades later, Prague became inextricable from the high-profile writers and activists who lived there, many of whom wrote regularly for American and British publications and were published widely in English. The city was in turn a place of terror, universal hope, malaise, and hope again to outsiders. It was an entry point into the Soviet Bloc that was often familiar, if exotic, to Western audiences. Therefore, the cultural exchange flowed both ways in and out of the city.

This thesis tells the story of jazz in Prague as a bell curve of hipness over time. Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, the jazz scene was establishment—too accepted by the Communist regime to have any real anti-Communist political power. In the 1970s and 1980s, jazz grew to be more politically subversive and more musically interesting. The peak of this trajectory was the mid-1980s. Through the 1989 political transition, the scene experienced a sharp downturn in hipness, ending in a 1990s state of kitsch. The shape of this change over time relies on a confluence of political and aesthetic changes in Prague, the Soviet Union, and the jazz world. The Prague jazz scene survived, through these changes, by toing the line of legality. In a city well-known for its dissidents by the 1980s, the jazz scene never really constituted a dissident group, despite various labels foisted upon them by the Czechoslovak regime and interested

¹² For more on the cultural consciousness of Prague, see: Chad Bryant, “German City,” in *Prague: Belonging in a Modern City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

¹³ For a discussion on this introduction of Soviet aesthetics to Czechoslovakia, albeit primarily about socialist realism in 1940s Prague architecture, see: Marcela Hanackova, “The First Steps of Socialist Realism in Czechoslovakia,” *Umeni* 10, no. 1 (2022): 19-37.

foreigners. It consistently valued the survival of the music over political dissent.

This story complicates common binaries of Cold War art. The Prague jazz scene was not either outright resistance or outright collaboration. In its repurposing of American art for non-political expression in Czechoslovakia, it was not either authentic or reproduced. Over several decades, it moved through waves of hipness and unhipness as the music and the contexts changed. Most crucially, it joins recent scholarship in challenging the popular memory of the Communist Bloc's iron grip on culture. Melissa Feinberg's history of the Communist Bloc emphasizes the extent to which citizens were primarily concerned with getting on with their lives, even through the various political change that was thrust upon them.¹⁴ Likewise, Jonathan Bolton's history of the Prague underground scene in the 1970s and 1980s emphasizes the power of the written word to confound a binary relationship between dissidents and an oppressive regime.¹⁵ Jazz music, and its ephemerality, adds yet another layer. One must not, of course, deny the repression. But one must not also collapse all cultural life onto a political plane. The bell-curve trajectory of the scene amplifies, not the struggle of the state to repress, but the struggle of musicians to define their music on their own terms.

Chapter 1 traces the history of jazz in Czechoslovakia from a decade before the Prague Spring to the effect of the invasion on the scene. By the crisis of the Prague Spring in 1968, the jazz scene in Czechoslovakia had reached its golden age. The music was not really part of the revolutionary feel of the Spring. However, the invasion created a new, smaller Czech cultural life and forced many musicians to flee the country or lose their party status. Jazz was never the primary target of normalization aftermath, and it was comfortable familiarity for Czech citizens

¹⁴ Feinberg.

¹⁵ Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012),

before and after the invasion.

Chapter 2 picks up as the gray of normalization set in. In the party purges that changed the complexion of professional life across the country, musicians formed the Jazz Section as a distinct group within the Musicians Union. Though it began as a body that promoted jazz and connected audiences to artists, the Section's purpose changed over its first several years. The group's major crisis of the early years was the inclusion of rock music in its programming. As rock became more popular and undeniably political, the Jazz Section managed to remain operational while still publishing samizdat and having run-ins with law enforcement. Therefore, the group made a different kind of political statement than the well-known dissident community in Prague: one that values institutional survival first, then represented its members, who often had dissident attitudes. This special place was a "gray zone" that allowed the Section to engage in illegal activity while still remaining part of the state machinery.¹⁶ The "gray zone" also had an aesthetic value—a space between the underground and mainstream music scenes. Therefore, the Section's cultural role in the 1970s was politically subversive—no longer the accepted music that it was in the 1970s—but still moderate. As Prague became the hub for anti-Communist dissent in 1977, though, the group's balance became increasingly untenable.

Chapter 3 outlines the final years of the Section, from the state's growing fears of the organization to the leaders' eventual arrests. As the state cracked down on Jazz Section activities beginning in 1982, the Section had a three-pronged relationship to dissent in the 1980s. One piece was western liberal intellectuals' rising fascination with the Section. They saw Prague—and the Section—as the purest ideal of political dissent. The second piece is the state's view of the group as too internationalist. The organization's ties to famous public intellectuals in the

¹⁶ Jiřina Šiklová, "The 'Gray Zone,'" *Social Sciences* 52, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 350.

United States and United Kingdom, the state thought, had led the group toward more open rebellion. The third, and most confounding, is the Section's decline and its leaders' eventual arrest as the even as the group remained legally slippery throughout the 1980s. These stories' coexistence demonstrates that the jazz scene never did constitute the dissent group that others, both Czech public figures and American and British outsiders, thought it should. Most importantly, things did not have to end the way they did. The arrests and eventual downfall of the Section was not a story of defiant dissent but of a jazz scene that survived through necessary means to make new music.

This trajectory—the transition of jazz from establishment to underground over the decades—seems backward. One would expect jazz, as it did in the United States, to make the slow march from the clubs to the concert halls, tightening up and mellowing along the way. Indeed, as this story opens, the American jazz greats, evangelists of the genre and kings of this concert hall jazz, ventured into Prague to share their music—only to find it was already there.

Chapter 1: Origins of Czech Jazz

Downbeat Magazine's cover for its June 13th, 1957 issue features a bandstand nearly completely shrouded in darkness. Only vaguely visible in the foreground is a drummer in a smart suit. Behind him are silhouettes and reflections—trumpets, cymbals, body parts fading into darkness. The text reads in block letters, "Special: Ray McKinley and His Band: Behind the Iron Curtain."¹⁷ In a year in which the most innovative jazz giants in the world were playing in New York, the biggest jazz journalists published a cover story about a nostalgic swing band touring in Communist Europe. The journey, according to the magazine, was harrowing and thrilling.

McKinley's band modeled itself on the Glenn Miller Band, the most famous American big band from the 1930s and 1940s. They played easy swing, popular from prewar radio and film. The band was the perfect vehicle for the U.S. State Department's initiatives to showcase American culture in the Communist Bloc. *Downbeat* focuses, though, not so much on the music as the band's touring travails. Their gig for the United States Ambassador in Prague was cancelled with only a day's notice. The musicians were stuck on a train outside Prague for 18 hours due to a visa mixup, and the group's legal counsel was housed for a night in what *Downbeat* calls a "detention camp."¹⁸ One band member said that they would have been arrested if they left the train. The cover story juxtaposes the band's political difficulty with the tremendous receptions from audiences at every gig, from Poland to Yugoslavia. Ray McKinley told *Downbeat*, "Response-wise, we have nothing at all like this in our country. For example, over here the young people like rock 'n' roll. But there was a real difference over there."¹⁹ The bandleader summed up the tour as a success, despite the difficulties of the trip. "Living there is

¹⁷ *Downbeat*, 24, no. 12, 13 June 1957.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

poor,” he said, “but they have lots of courage. I think we made a lot of friends for the United States.”²⁰

The Golden Age

Despite *Downbeat*'s efforts to characterize the audiences for American readers, Czechs—especially the ones at the McKinley gigs and other acts regularly touring in Prague—might have been bewildered by this characterization. Czechoslovaks were not unenlightened people hearing a new and foreign music. Hosting American musicians touring through Europe was one side of cultural life in Prague. Cultivating its own jazz talent was another entirely. These two projects happened, of course, simultaneously. While *Downbeat* wrote about harrowing tours through the Communist bloc, young Czechs themselves were listening to whatever American records they could find—and building a language of their own.

Emil Viklický would become one of the biggest names in Czechoslovakian jazz, but in the late 1950s before his stint in the United States, he was a teenager in Olomouc, a city in the Moravian region of Czechoslovakia. He heard his first jazz when he was a young teenaged, from records his friend who brought them back from England. He would sometimes catch a song on the radio as well, from *Voice of America Jazz Hour* broadcasts—a program led by jazz broadcaster Willis Conover that played American records throughout the Soviet Bloc.²¹ Viklický remembers jazz not as revolutionary, but just as the music he liked.²²

A declassified CIA document from 1952 backs up Viklický's experience. It estimates that “records of American Jazz, made in the CSR, can be easily purchased in Prague; they sell for

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Robert Mcg. Thomas Jr., “Willis Conover Is Dead at 75; Aimed Jazz at the Soviet Bloc,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1996.

²² Emil Viklický (pianist) in discussion with the author, July 2022.

about 50 per cent more than records of ‘non-Western’ music. Recordings made by such favorites as Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman can be obtained without any difficulty.”²³ Much scholarship has been devoted to this transatlantic exchange. “Jazz ambassadors” the likes of Dizzy Gillespie, Louie Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and Dave Brubeck touring through the Soviet bloc.²⁴ Of course, the nature of the American jazz broadcasts is hotly contested. Some scholars argue the program was constructive cultural exchange; others say it was cultural warfare.²⁵

Willis Conover’s *Voice of America Jazz Hour*—the radio broadcasts that Viklický and fellow young fans heard—makes clear the difficulties in pinning down exactly the effect of distributing jazz to Eastern Bloc nations. A vast network of fan mail and responses from Conover’s fans in the region display their own attempts to build community around listening to his broadcasts. One young Russian wrote to Conover, “Since we do not have any musicians of our own, the young people have to sit by the radio.”²⁶ Another young fan remembers that all jazz fans understood the importance of these broadcasts: “The only contact we had with contemporary jazz was the [*Music USA*] hour with Willis Conover. This was our real jazz

²³ “Voice of America Broadcasts to Czechoslovakia,” General CIA Records Collection, doc. CIA-RDP82-00047R000100410009-5, CIA FOIA Reading Room, [<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp82-00047r000100410009-5>], 8.

²⁴ For more on the American jazz diplomacy, see Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2006), Historians disagree about the effect of these state-sponsored tours—from actively helpful to catastrophic. The reception from non-American audiences, though, was almost always wildly enthusiastic.

²⁵ Rüdiger Ritter, “Broadcasting Jazz into the Eastern Bloc—Cold War Weapon or Cultural Exchange? The Example of Willis Conover,” *Jazz Perspectives* 7, no. 2 (2013): 19. Margo Shohl Rosen, “Willis of Oz: How Willis Conover Enchanted the Thaw Generation of Poets with his ‘Jazz Hour’ Radio Program,” *Ulbandus Review* 16 (2014): 7.

²⁶ Letter from Nikolai Afanassievich Ivashohenko to Willis Conover, translated from Russian, October 14, 1962, Willis Conover Collection, Willis Library, University of North Texas, Denton, Texas.

academy.”²⁷ Czech audiences did not listen passively to American jazz. They listened with fellow fans, wrote letters to Conover himself, and requested albums from the United States. The music itself originated in the United States, but Czech audiences were excited, educated, and engaged in the music themselves. This consumption of jazz was part of a larger consumerist trend in the Eastern Bloc after Stalin’s death as citizens earned more money and societies recovered from the scarcity of the immediate post-war years.²⁸

To be sure, though, American broadcasts and American records were not the only jazz available in Prague. By the 1960s, a growing scene in Czechoslovakia was making its own music. During this period, jazz musicians in the nation made a habit out of survival. Renowned Czech jazz critic Lubomír Doružka described the main goal before renewed censorship during normalization as “trying to keep jazz out of trouble.”²⁹ Jazz had found its way into Czech cultural life, and, according to critics, the scene was in its “Golden Age” in the late 1950s and early 1960s, paving the way for its continued survival.³⁰ Thanks to musicians such as Pavel Blatný and his “Third Stream” style, the genre had legitimate Czech artists and could justify the music as a national expression. This music was far from the Glenn Miller easy listening that toured in 1957. It was a fusion of jazz and classical music that borrowed heavily from Czech classical composers.

Luděk Hulan was the grandfather of the early 1960s jazz scene. Born in Prague, he was the best bassist and most prolific bandleader in the city for two decades.³¹ In 1965 he, in

²⁷ Roman Dylag, interview with the author, in Keith Hatschek, “The Impact of American Jazz Diplomacy in Poland During the Cold War Era,” *Jazz Perspectives* 4, no. 3 (2010): 271.

²⁸ Feinberg, 69.

²⁹ Lubomír Doružka, “Jazz Under Two Totalitarian Regimes: Problems of Eastern European Jazz Historiography,” in *Jazz Und Sozialgeschichte*, ed. Theo Mäusli (Zurich: Cronos, 1994), 36.

³⁰ Zaddach, 119-20.

³¹ Gerhard Conrad, *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, vol. 2, Barry Dean Kernfield, ed. (New

collaboration with other musicians and poets, released *Poezie a Jazz*, an experimental album that combined spoken poetry with original jazz compositions as accompaniments. The tracks have all the signs of the Beats in the United States—sparse, atonal bass solos, finger snaps, and dramatic readings. One can imagine these pieces performed live in a coffee shop. One tune is even called “Beatnice,” translated to Beatniks. Similarly, Saxophonist Karel Velebný formed the S & Q Quartet (later the SHQ Ensemble) with other state orchestra musicians in 1961. Feeling constrained by the straight-ahead big band style of the Czech state bands, SHQ composed innovative jazz that was just as hip as Miles Davis’s playing in the United States.³² Importantly, they were not playing American standards. The ensemble wrote and performed their own tunes, sounding closer to avant-garde jazz than anything Glenn Miller ever played. These projects are indicative of the vibrant artistic community in Prague that brought together young musicians and artists under the tutelage of the few grandfathers of the scene.

The scene was not just young and eager musicians, but critics, infrastructure, and audience as well. In 1960, a Czechoslovakian state record label called Supraphon released a collection of tracks entitled *Anthology of Jazz in Czechoslovakia 1958-1960*, a record named “Best European Contribution to the Development of Jazz” by the German Jazz Federation.³³ Starting in 1964, the city held the Prague Jazz Festival. In the festival’s second year, even *Downbeat* magazine was calling the lineup “impressive”—drawing American stars like Don Cherry and the Modern Jazz Quartet³⁴. These groups played alongside Czech groups in Prague

York: Grove, 2002), 292.

³² Gerhard Conrad, *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, vol. 3, Barry Dean Kernfield, ed. (New York: Grove, 2002), 837.

³³ Zaddach, 120. *Jazz in Czechoslovakia 1961* (Gatefold, Vinyl, 1963). In the spirit of direct cultural exchange from the United States, this compilation includes a track from the Prague Dixieland Band.

³⁴ “Americans in Europe—the Busy Cycle Continues,” *Downbeat* 32, no. 22, 21 October 1965.

clubs like Reduta, the self-proclaimed first jazz club in Central Europe.³⁵

These three strands of cultural life occurred together in Czechoslovakia—American acts touring in Prague, foundational Czech jazz musicians and critics, and young listening to American records and visiting Czech clubs. The Iron Curtain was porous, and jazz—the great American artform—passed through. By the mid-1960s, musicians had created a distinct Czech musical language.³⁶ The audiences were as up on the scene as *Downbeat* readers, and they didn't need a swing band from America to tell them what was hip.

Soviet policy, too, allowed for wider consumption of jazz around the Eastern Bloc. After Stalin's death, Khrushchev took on a piecemeal liberalizing project that allowed for a wider range of music, writing, and other art to circulate. During his leadership, Khrushchev spoke defensively about Soviet attitudes toward “Western” music, especially jazz and pop.³⁷ In a speech in 1963, Khrushchev toes a careful line on the subject. He says, “The enthusiasm for jazz music and jazz bands which has developed cannot be regarded as normal. It should not be thought that we are against all jazz music; there are different kinds of jazz bands and different music for them. However, there is a kind of music that gives you a feeling of nausea and a pain in the stomach.”³⁸ During the “thaw” Khrushchev relaxed restrictions on the arts and cultural life in the Soviet Union, changing both the content and process of arts production. Namely, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the top hits began to more closely resemble American tunes. The thaw both allowed for more importing of American music and for more Soviet production of

³⁵ “History,” Reduta Jazz Club, www.redutajazzclub.cz/history.

³⁶ Zaddach, 119-21.

³⁷ Priscilla Johnson, *Khrushchev and the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1965), 148.

³⁸ “Khrushchev on Culture,” *Encounter*, Pamphlet No. 9, in *Khrushchev and the Arts*, Priscilla Johnson and Leopold lobed, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1965), 175.

American-style music.³⁹

Approaching 1968, jazz fans and musicians had no special struggle of their own. The music, for many fans, was just the kind of subtle rebellion that risked little during a relaxing Soviet regime. Jazz, for musicians, had become, far more than an imitation of American bands, a means of national and personal expression. The next year would complicate things.

The Spring and Invasion

Milan Kundera, from Brno, Czechoslovakia, was a jazz musician in his early years before he took up writing fiction.⁴⁰ In 1967, he published what would become a leading voice of reform during the Prague Spring, the several months during 1968 in which Czechs protested for free expression, liberalization, moderate economic reform—“socialism with a human face.”⁴¹

Alexander Dubček, leader of Czechoslovakia, supported moderate reform within the Communist Party. The movement ballooned from intra-party fighting into a man popular demonstration in Prague—people demonstrating on the streets and public figures from around the world offering their support.

Kundera published *The Joke* just before the outbreak of artistic expression and protest that was the spring of 1968. The novel tells the story of a young Communist student who

³⁹ For more on the cultural process changes that the thaw brought about, see Stites, “Springtime for Khrushchev, 1953-1964,” 123-47; Denis Kozlov and Eleanory Gilburd, eds. *The Thaw: Soviet society and culture during the 1950s and 1960s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

⁴⁰ Olga Carlisle, “A Talk With Milan Kundera,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1985. In this interview, Kundera talks about his early life and his conscious move away from music as a profession. He says, “As a small boy, I hated the public that refused to listen to Stravinsky and applauded Tchaikovsky or Mozart. I have retained a passion for modern art; this is my fidelity to my father. But I refused to take on his profession of musician. I liked music but I did not like musicians. I gagged at the thought of spending my life among musicians.”

⁴¹ Kieran Williams, *The Prague Spring and its Aftermath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

unravels his life by telling a joke taken badly. The book became a representation of the Spring's aims, and Kundera one of its most vocal proponents.

The Spring gave a new prominence to Czech intellectuals and artists, emboldened by weakening censorship of the past several years and increasingly galvanized to liberalizing action.⁴² Though the reform movement in the party was causing the real rub with Moscow, many Prague citizens saw the real action as the burgeoning expression from artists and writers. Hana Laing was an 18-year-old first-year university student when she saw a change in the city's cultural expression. "There were lots of theatres, small experimental theatres," she recalls, "I remember seeing all the Pinter there was at that stage, and there were literary magazines one could read. There were suddenly translations from more risqué authors from the West, there were political discussions."⁴³ Some imprisoned artists were granted amnesty during the Dubček period, when they made art on the streets for a few months in what they called anti-socialist "happenings."⁴⁴ Art and books were publicly anti-socialist. The new literary magazine *Literární listy* published literary pieces and political opinions side by side. For the first time in several years, artists and writers en masse took up a dual cultural-political purpose.

One of these Czech public intellectuals was Ludvík Vaculík, a well-known author and outspoken proponent of free expression. In his fervor, he wrote a manifesto—distributed all around Prague in May 1968—that raised the stakes of the movement. In this manifesto, "The Two Thousand Words," published in four Czech publications in June 1968, as the Prague Spring had raged on for a few months. The problem was larger than political or economic trouble. He

⁴² Williams, 67.

⁴³ Hana Laing, interview with the author, Bridget Kendall, ed., *The Cold War: A New Oral History*, (London: Penguin Random House, 2017), 333.

⁴⁴ For more on the anti-socialist "happenings" in Prague, see Pavlina Morganova, "Life is Art, Art is Life: Czech Action 1964-1969," *Counter-Culture* 26 (2015).

distills the rot in the nation to “the decline of our economy, for crimes committed against the innocent, and for the introduction of censorship to prevent anyone writing about these things.”⁴⁵ Vaculík warned that the euphoric feeling of the Spring would change as summer rolled around and people tired of protest.

After all, the fervor was not sustainable, and protests were becoming more radical. One participant in the protests remembers that “[a]fter ‘The Two Thousand Words,’ things became more heated. The streets were full of people. They were just criticizing the regime from every possible aspect...I remember a meeting in the night in front of Prague Radio and [people were saying] ‘Communists worse than fascists!’”⁴⁶ Indeed, according to officials in Moscow and elsewhere in the Eastern Bloc—which was getting more uneasy by the day—the movement was moving dangerously close to counter-revolution. One side or the other would have to give.

In August, Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev decided Dubček and Prague had gone too far, and he authorized 165,000 Warsaw Pact troops and 4,600 tanks to invade the city.⁴⁷ Photographs show students shouting at young Russians manning tanks rolling down Wenceslas Square. For Czechs, it was a moment of shock and confusion. Had their protests for economic reform and freer living really constituted a counter-revolution that required a violent response?

Vaculík’s “Two Thousand Words” came to embody the anger and difficulty of the type of attempted reform in Prague, and the splintering of popular aims during a mass protest movement. Many reformers fought for economic change and social liberalization—and many

⁴⁵ Ludvik Vaculík, “Two Thousand Words, May 27, 1968,” in *The Czech Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, Jan Bažant, Nina Bažantová, and Frances Starn, eds. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 377-78.

⁴⁶ Julius Tomin, interview with the author, *The Cold War: A New Oral History*, 335.

⁴⁷ Williams, 112.

advocated only one. Vaculík, for one, charged the working class with the task of making reform a “grass-roots movement.”⁴⁸ But it was a mantle that some Czechs did not want to carry. Czechoslovak politicians, including Dubček, condemned the sentiments, and many ordinary people did, too. “Because of two thousand words,” some joked, “we have two thousand tanks.”⁴⁹ Others expressed the popular movement as a time of broadly felt optimism about their shared future, not an attempted coup. “There is no counter-revolution here,” one participant in protests remembers, “I don’t often agree with Milan Kundera but I agree with him on that one. It was a beautiful week.”⁵⁰

Jazz During the Spring

Because of the institutionalization of the music and popularity of the genre, Prague jazz was not—despite the myth of the music and the messaging of American jazz ambassadors—the explicit language of reform that Vaculík advanced. To begin with, Soviet attitude toward the art form—and other creative endeavors of its satellite states—changed over time. Therefore, Warsaw Pact invasion did not assume an entirely known future for jazz, though it did not bode entirely well for musicians.

However, by the time of the Warsaw Pact invasion in Prague, a new Soviet leader was in power, and with Leonid Brezhnev came new cultural parameters. His ascendance marked the end of the cultural thaw of the Khrushchev years. The state opposition against jazz had been declared over as, like in Czechoslovakia, a narrow range of straight-ahead jazz had been adopted into the official Soviet music canon. Russia had its own state jazz bands that played Glenn Miller-esque

⁴⁸ Williams, 89.

⁴⁹ *The Czech Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, Jan Bažant, Nina Bažantová, and Frances Starn, eds. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 376.

⁵⁰ Zdena Tomin, interview with the author, *The Cold War: A New Oral History*, 341.

tunes.⁵¹ Of course, there was some experimental music that found its way past the censors. In the late 1960s and on through his time in power, Brezhnev saw—or, perhaps, decided to overlook, a growing genre of improvisational music in the Soviet Union and in the satellite states. The music fell somewhere in between free jazz—even hipper than SHQ tunes—and traditional folk music.⁵² Largely, though, this acceptance into Soviet culture disarmed the music of its political potency. It was no longer the language of rebellious youth, but fine Soviet taste.⁵³ To be clear, Soviet officials did not authorize Warsaw Pact invasion to shutter jazz clubs and arrest musicians, but the cultural parameters of authorized Soviet expression would become important to Czech morale during the Spring and immediately after the invasion.

The Soviet attitudes would soon have their way in the nation, as Dubček flew to Moscow—at the coercion of Brezhnev—to “negotiate” a peace. In reality, the moderate leader was strong-armed into signing the Moscow Protocol, which bound Czechoslovak leaders to Soviet directives.⁵⁴ He flew back to Prague to address the people. Listeners recall his “haunting, eggshell voice, minute-long pauses, and sobs” as he spoke.⁵⁵ He told the nation:

Our turbulent and difficult six-month, post-January period has not been in vain...we shall endeavor to make our talks with our friends contribute to our purpose of continuing in peace to carry out and fulfill the revival process and gain all necessary preconditions for it. This is the wish of our people who, in January, entered a path of which they knew would not be easy and which they, in spite of this, chose voluntarily and spontaneously.

⁵¹ S. Frederick Starr, *Red & Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1994).

⁵² Jason Weiss, “How the Soviets Got It Together,” *New York Times*, 6 January 1991.

⁵³ Juliane Fürst, “If You’re Going to Moscow, Be Sure to Wear Some Flowers in Your Hair (and Bring a Bottle of Port Wine in Your Pocket): The Soviet Hippie ‘Sistema’ and Its Life in, Despite, and with ‘Stagnation,’” *Reconsidering Stagnation in the Brezhnev Era: Ideology and Exchange*, Dina Fainberg and Artemy M. Kalinovsky, eds. (Washington, DC: Lexington Books, 2016), 130-31.

⁵⁴ Williams, 143.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

For this reason, the positions of socialism are today stronger than ever in the past.”⁵⁶

The fun was over, punctuated by over 72 people dead on the streets of Prague.⁵⁷

Of course, at the center of the questions of censorship and free expression were the musicians themselves, and their ordinary lives. Emil Viklický remembers a story told to him by George Mraz, the Czech bassist who offered Viklický a job in New York during the pianist’s years in the United States.⁵⁸ In October 1968, George’s father had boarded a streetcar in Prague. He gave his seat to a woman and stood by the car’s railing. As they turned a corner, the axle gun of an invading Russian tank broke through the streetcar window, struck George’s father in the head, and killed him. George was in the United States studying jazz at Berklee when his father died. Once his student visa expired, he decided to stay in the United States. He did not return to his birth country until 1989.⁵⁹

The Spring failed; Moscow, after several months, forced Dubček out and replaced him with a party faithful; and the moment fizzled.⁶⁰

After the Invasion

A photograph shows Duke playing a Petrof grand piano, surrounded by speakers and amps. Men and women are packed into the space behind the stage—seated in chairs, on the floor, and disappearing into a dark passageway under the theater balcony. A blackboard sign propped

⁵⁶ Full Text of Speech by Alexander Dubček, 27 August 1968, box 179, folder 5, Documenting the Cold War, University of Texas Libraries Collection, Austin, TX.

⁵⁷ Williams, 147.

⁵⁸ Neil Genzlinger, “George Mraz, Consummate Bassist, Dies at 77,” *New York Times*, 28 September 2021. Mraz’s birth name was Jiří, but he used the Americanization George professionally.

⁵⁹ Emil Viklický (pianist) in discussion with the author, July 2022. Viklický also told this story in a London Jazz News tribute to Mraz upon the bassist’s death.

<https://londonjazznews.com/2021/09/20/george-mraz-1944-2021-a-tribute-by-emil-viklicky/>.

⁶⁰ Of course, the story on Dubček’s replacement is complicated. He stayed in power, though extremely chastened, for another year. For more specifics on the transition out of the Spring and into Husák’s administration, see Williams.

up behind the expansive drum set reads “Jazz” in block letters. A television camera is visible in the foreground.⁶¹ Duke Ellington and his band were playing at the Prague International Jazz Festival on October 31, 1969, almost exactly a year after the Russian troops invaded the city to crush the reforms of the Prague Spring.

After the tanks had rolled back out of town, and Dubček had been replaced by Gustav Husák, a loyal party politician, Wenceslas Square—which had been the molten center of protest and expression just a few months before—was back to normal. The triumphant statue of King Wenceslas was faced down the open boulevard, on his horse with his right arm in the air. The art nouveau facades of Prague’s most decadent era lined the streets, and tram lines run along through the air. This space, now a normal city center in late 1969, had been the site of student Jan Palach’s terrible act of protest in January. At the base of the Wenceslas statue, he lit himself on fire, an effort to return the Czech public to the popular democratizing fervor of 1968. He failed. The city’s throngs of protestors, weighing the promise of “quiet contentment” and economic stability in exchange for no reform, piped down.⁶²

Just two blocks from the square, a sign above a hole in the wall door read “JAZZ CLUB” in block letters and in English. This was the street entrance of Reduta Jazz Club, the first jazz venue in Central Europe, opened in 1957, and continuously open through the tumult of the Prague Spring and military invasion. The upcoming shows were posted in the windows, along with photos of the biggest names to visit the club. A large floor speaker sits out front, covered with strips of paper—“music,” “art,” “shop.”

⁶¹ Jan Barta, *Duke Ellington, jazz musician composer, piano, Prague, 1969*, Alamy Stock Photo, <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-duke-ellington-jazz-musician-composer-piano-prague-33302393.html>.

⁶² Melissa Feinberg, *Communism in Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2021), 114.

Through the door and down a winding hallway brings visitors to the *real* entrance—a coatroom, then down an even smaller passage to the cozy lounge. The room is all dark wood and satin, not at all different from the most famous clubs in the world jazz capital New York City. Like Manhattan’s Village Vanguard or Birdland, the stage is just barely set above a room of several small tables and flickering candles. The spot has all the hallmarks of the scene. Smoke and alcohol—the bar is down a few stairs to the right—and late nights.

In October 1969, Reduta was *the* jazz club in Prague. It routinely hosted the biggest names in jazz, and that autumn Duke came to town. All the players in Duke Ellington’s Orchestra squeezed onstage—Duke sitting at the piano in the corner, simultaneously beating out the tempo with his foot and directing the great Johnny Hodges on alto saxophone. They played the biggest American hits for this Prague International Jazz Festival, and the smoky room was packed to see the biggest jazz names in the world.⁶³

Perhaps the arrival of Duke and his players in Prague exactly one year after the bloody crackdown on protests—Russian tanks rolling down the wide streets of Wenceslas Square—should surprise outsiders. Did the harsh imposition of “normalization” policy not infiltrate every sphere of Czech life? The packed Reduta lounge at the Prague International Jazz Festival suggests otherwise. Duke was there to entertain. In the debris of the Russian invasion, though, what was the implication of entertainment, and what did the “normalized” Czech government care?

The new Czechoslovak leader Gustav Husák was not a conservative extremist but a centrist, so his censorship aims were not the harshest in the Soviet Bloc. In fact, in a warning to

⁶³ “Paha International Jazz,” *Europe Jazz Network*, www.europejazz.net/festival/praha-international-jazz.

ideological conservatives a year after the invasion, he promised that the Czech Communist party was not a “slaughterhouse for the butchery of fallen liberals.”⁶⁴ Husák, like his predecessor Dubček, was imprisoned himself in the early 1950s for crimes of “bourgeois nationalism,” a fact about which he often joked.⁶⁵

Czech political writer Otto Ulč described the cultural life in Prague after the invasion, not as a return to totalitarianism, but a “weakened, rather exhausted ‘post-totalitarian system’” which emerged amongst the public.⁶⁶ The extent to which the system was totalitarian, especially in the years during the thaw, is unclear. The exhaustion, though, was clear. Many artists, like the young George Mraz on his way to study jazz at Berklee, left entirely, knowing they would likely stay abroad for decades. Of the artists who stayed, there were those who embraced dissidence, publishing *samizdat*, or banned works, independently. Some of this work was solely political opinion or manifesto, but much of it was artistic expression with political content. Up-and-coming Czech playwright and future president Václav Havel (who will become increasingly relevant to the story of Prague jazz) was blacklisted in 1969, but his *samizdat* plays were quite popular. Ulč describes the split as “two parallel cultures in the country: the official one—sterile and followed by few—and the unofficial one that has produced major works.”⁶⁷

Jazz often fell in the space between these two categories. Of course, there were the musicians who fled immediately after the invasion. Unlike, though, the dissident writers, jazz

⁶⁴ “Husák in Warning to Conservatives,” *New York Times*, 11 October 1969.

⁶⁵ Paul Hofmann, “Prague Power Struggle: Husák Seen Following Centrist Course Between Liberals and Conservatives,” *New York Times*, 17 December 1969. “You must excuse my uncultured Czech,” he told reporters. “You must keep in mind that I learned Czech at Pankrac [a prison outside Prague].”

⁶⁶ Otto Ulč, “Those Who Left: A Current Profile,” in *The Prague Spring: A Mixed Legacy*, Jiri Pehe, ed. (New York: Freedom House, 1988), 143.

⁶⁷ Jiri Pehe, “Dissident Writers: What Are They Saying?” in *The Prague Spring: A Mixed Legacy*, 159.

musicians had a trade that paid their expenses. Like other trades, musicians had been part of a mandatory Czechoslovak Musicians' Union since the early 1950s. Much of the crackdown on musical expression, then, was not direct from law. Instead, like in the journalists' union, members were urged to "exercise 'voluntary discipline'" in their work.⁶⁸ This movement—softer than the censorship of the 1950s—accompanied a massive purge of the Communist Party, executed basically without violence. Helpfully, about three quarters of members who had been purged in 1969 were reissued party cards after the purge.⁶⁹ This half-hearted approach to reform also marked the implementation of censorship, which was "relaxed and without direct enforcement" at television and radio stations after the invasion.⁷⁰

Most importantly, censorship was, on the whole, softer for musicians than for writers. The ephemerality of music—especially instrumental, improvisational jazz—meant that the regime did not pay as much mind. Emil Viklický, who was playing shows at Reduta and around town in the early 1970s, summed up the Party's approach to jazz in these years, which had been considered during the roughest days of the early regime as "bourgeois nationalism."⁷¹ In this new "realist ascendancy," every issue was a matter of scale.⁷² He recalled, "When it was only 20 people sitting in a jazz club, they didn't care. But in 1975 when suddenly 3,000 people showed up at Prague Jazz Days, they started to be concerned."⁷³

After the invasion, he suggests, the debris settled and folks got on with it. When Jan

⁶⁸ Williams, 227.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁷⁰ Tad Szulc, "Czech Aides Are Relaxed in Implementing New Censorship," *New York Times*, 4 September 1968.

⁷¹ Martin Lücke, "Vilified, Venerated, Forbidden: Jazz in the Stalinist Era," trans. Anita Ip, *Music and Politics* 1, no. 2 (2007).

⁷² Williams, 192.

⁷³ Viklický, interview with Anita Malhotra, *ArtsMania*, 21 June 2015.

Palach lit himself on fire in the middle of Wenceslas Square, he hoped his death would re-galvanize the nation, but it did not. The start of normalization marked a “mixture of ironic resignation, boredom, and often despair...particularly for writers, artists and other intellectuals.”⁷⁴ They faced a future that was not entirely bleak, but certainly smaller. The new Czechoslovak government sought a deal with its people: be content with less political freedoms, smaller social lives, and we will provide you stability. It was a tradeoff many Czechs were willing to make.⁷⁵ This was the promise of normalization, as it began after the invasion. However, though art was no longer explicitly anti-socialist, it was implicitly anti-normalization. But—as evidenced by Duke’s raucous sets at the Prague International Jazz Festival and the hip Reduta club selling out shows every week, some people in Prague were still hungry for straight-ahead swing, even as they saw a new censorship regime coming down the line.

Hana Laing, the university student in Prague, had been hopeful of the aims of the Spring. She had been on the streets in 1968 and had known Jan Palach before his death. After the rage of invasion, though, she saw her own life change:

Suddenly all the things started shrinking, shrinking, shrinking, and that was normalization. Your life started shrinking in the same way. You were not allowed to do this, that and the other. The writers who had this wonderful freedom to speak freely, to write freely, the filmmakers who had the same, that was very swiftly stopped, and we went back to the old, very dusty socialist regime with those terrible films and series on television, about ordinary people living ordinary lives being blessed by the Communist Party.⁷⁶

There were, then, three lines of thinking entering the 1970s surrounding cultural life in Prague. One was the cynicism, a hangover from the invasion. Life became smaller, and so did

⁷⁴ Bolton, 12.

⁷⁵ Feinberg, 116.

⁷⁶ Hana Laing, interview with the author, in Bridget Kendall, *The Cold War: A New Oral History* (London: Penguin Random House, 2017), 344.

social engagements and artistic expression. Another was the aftertaste of the euphoria of the Prague Spring. Those few months had propelled artists to national voices and activist leaders. Could musicians reach that height again, and did they want too? The final strand is the most constant. Musicians would continue to play the hippest music, and audiences would always want to listen.

Chapter 2: The Jazz Section and its Questions

“Art isn’t there to be some great mirror registering all of History’s ups and downs, variations, endless repetitions. Art is not a village band marching dutifully along at History’s heels. It is there to create its own history, which in itself represents no value. The one thing that has some chance of enduring is the history of its arts.”⁷⁷

Václav Havel said the streets of Prague after normalization set in were calm—“calm as a morgue or a grave.”⁷⁸ Since Jan Palach’s self-immolation in the cold of 1969, the new terms of living had set in, and there had been little organized anger against it. The people, either tired, hopeless, or simply satisfied, had retreated to their homes and domestic spheres, pacified by the promise of an easier life. To Havel, it was one of “unprecedented drabness.”⁷⁹

Of course, musicians still played. In accordance with normalization aims to provide more goods to Czech citizens, President Husák still allowed popular American jazz musicians to tour the country, playing to packed crowds. Benny Goodman, the jazz clarinetist, band leader, and megastar in the 1930s and 1940s, came to Prague with his band during the early years of the new regime. Even this entertainment, though, has the tinge of cultural staleness. English-language magazine *Radio Free Jazz* wrote about the engagement: “Drenched in sweat after the performance, the 67-year-old clarinetist remarked that the scene reminded him of his heyday as the ‘King of Swing,’ when packed crowds were everyday occurrences.”⁸⁰ These groups were popular and good fun, and they did not threaten the regime at all.

Czech musicians, in the bands that were sanctioned and supported by the state, still

⁷⁷ Milan Kundera, trans. Linda Asher, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 27.

⁷⁸ Václav Havel, “Dear Dr. Husák,” *Open Letters: Selected Writings 1965-1990* (New York: Random House, 1990), 72.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁸⁰ Ira Sabin, “Surroundings,” *Radio Free Jazz* 19, no. 12 (December 1976):5.

played freely in Prague clubs, too. Take, for example, the Prague Dixieland Jazz Band. The group played Dixieland jazz, a subgenre that was popular in the 1930s American South. In a report to American audiences on the state of jazz in Eastern Europe, a journalist calls the band a “fine, swinging group composed of four doctors, among others.”⁸¹ This group had been established in the city since its formation decades before. During its most popular years in the early 1960s, one American journalist said the group was “remarkable only in that it came from Czechoslovakia.”⁸² Dixieland jazz, by 1970s, was four decades past its heyday. The group’s biggest hit was a tune written for 1920s American crooner Al Jolson, “If You Only Knew Suzie (Like I Know Suzie).”⁸³ This, one of the most celebrated official jazz groups in Czechoslovakia, was now jazz with a stultifying nostalgia.⁸⁴ The most exciting art of Czechs’ recent history had come at the end of the 1960s—New Wave film, art “happenings,” a new generation of poets, new plays showing at every theatre around Prague.⁸⁵ After the invasion, and as Prague slogged into the new decade, lots of this excitement slowed to a near-halt. For example, since the post-invasion Communist Party purges had gutted artists’ guilds, the Ministry of Culture had to approve a theater’s program, of course narrowing and flattening the kind of art that showed around the city.⁸⁶ Film directors who could no longer get screenings at big commercial theaters had to find a home in smaller, artsier venues in the city. And journalists writing about culture in

⁸¹ Marv Edwards, “Jazz News From Eastern Europe,” *Hip* 5, no. 1 (1969): 3.

⁸² Alan Bates, “Caught in the Act,” *Down Beat* 30, no. 26 (26 September 1963): 41.

⁸³ Prague Dixieland Band, “If You Only Knew Suzie (Like I Know Suzie),” by Buddy DeSylva and Joseph Meyer, recorded 1962, track 1 on *If You Knew Suzie*, Supraphon, vinyl EP.

⁸⁴ Czech author Josef Škvorecký spoke about the popularity of the Prague Dixieland Band in the 1950s. Even then, he said, the band was evocative of the idealized world of American silent film. Škvorecký, in conversation with the author, in Marek Kusiba, “Great Authors of Our Time: Josef Škvorecký” *Books in Canada* 28, no. 5 (1999): 20-23.

⁸⁵ Václav Havel, trans. Paul Wilson *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 50-51.

⁸⁶ Bryant, 175.

the city were so rare because the writers' union was hit hardest by the purges.

The cultural life of the city suffered not just as a generator of art but as a community of artists. The Party achieved its atomization of artist communities by pushing out people who could not prove they would not be a threat and requiring a level of bureaucratic oversight and meddling which restricted artists. To be sure, the world of Prague theater, music, and underground art was comparatively small when considering the national reach of pop music and television shows. The insular scene, though, as the party well knew from a few years ago, had enough manpower to galvanize citizens toward action. This flattening of the scene, then, was meant to isolate and discourage, rather than resume the harsh censorship regime of the 1950s. Malaise was the word around town.⁸⁷

But a young well-connected person might have been able to find a printed bulletin in the corner of a jazz club or friend's apartment. They would have seen a slim pamphlet with a black and white photo of a man playing a soprano saxophone on the cover. Above him in block letters read JAZZ 1.⁸⁸ Inside the brochure were headlines, in Czech and English. A short profile of American clarinetist Albert Nicholas and his Traditional Jazz Studio took up half a page. One section told readers "where to go for jazz."⁸⁹ A program listed jam sessions happening in Prague from 11 p.m. to 3 a.m. on an upcoming Saturday.⁹⁰ One article states triumphantly, "I Saw the Simon Band," Luděk Hulan's new orchestra. The writer concludes, "Long live Czechoslovak jazz as music and a rich cultural and national tradition."⁹¹ The entire brief magazine is brimming

⁸⁷ Bryant, 156-202.

⁸⁸ "Jazz 1," (Prague: Jazz Section, 1972), in Jazz Section Archive <https://jazz.ustrcr.cz/docs.html>. All documents in the Jazz Section Archive database referenced in this paper are viewable at the above link.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

with excitement for music and the people who play it. It was the first bulletin published by the Jazz Section, an offshoot of the Czech Musician's Union. The group promoted jazz all around the country, along with the normal functions of a Czech trade union. Most importantly, it welcomed members who were fans of jazz, not just musicians themselves. President of the organization Milan Dvořák laid out the purpose of the jazz bulletin, and the Jazz Section itself, on its first page. He writes that the Section is to be “an integral part of our progressive cultural front” and “to facilitate the development of jazz music and to help it find its place in the life of our socialist society.”⁹² These statements toed the party line and presented the normalization vision of culture: untroubled, untroubling. It was, in Havel's words, “smooth, hackneyed, superficial.”⁹³ The Jazz Section and the 6-page JAZZ 1 bulletin were not underground opposition to this pseudo-culture. They were, originally, a part of it.

Soon, though, the Section, and the scene it inspired, would change. Paradoxically, as more artists and writers joined the union, it ventured further into the world of dissent, *samizdat* publishing, and other illegal activity. There is no easy explanation for the shift, which occurred over just a few years. The Section did not undergo a change in leadership or vision. It continued, up until the time its leaders were arrested, a branch of the Musicians' Union. One notable change, though, as told below, is the introduction of rock music to the Section's programming. Over a few years, the character of the organization changed—not drastically, but noticeably. One might assume that the Section was just getting hipper, but these changes had effects outside of the concert hall.

Rock and other experimental music brought the Section closer to the young people and

⁹² Peter Bugge, “Normalization and the Limits of the Law: The Case of the Czech Jazz Section,” *East European Politics and Societies* 22, no. 2 (2008): 286, 309.

⁹³ Havel, “Dear Dr. Husák,” 132.

the underground scene—playing at small bars and publicized through word-of-mouth—but it stayed itself squarely above ground. Musical content and political intent blur together, and a change in one precipitates, perhaps even encourages, a change in the other. In this way, the Jazz Section defines a distinct type of dissent, one which has no stated political agenda and uses *survival* in the gray area of legality as a tool against the state.

The Union and the Section

Legendary Czech writer Josef Škvorecký wrote that, to understand the Jazz Section, one must “have some understanding of Marxism.”⁹⁴ One must also understand the life of jazz musicians. They were mostly playing gigs where they could get them, either for state bands or shows around town, schlepping their instrument cases up stairs and backstage, finding the money where they could. These people were not the virtuosos, the composers of “serious music,” the sweethearts of Czech elites. Therefore, when 1950s Stalinist governments required artists to join unions according to their trade, jazz artists did not join the Union of Composers and Concert Artists. Instead, they had to join the Union of Employees of Cultural Institutions for the “rank-and-file musicians.”⁹⁵ The union doled out jobs to members and decided which functions the state orchestras and bands would play. The elite Union of Composers and Concert Artists commissioned pieces for performance and met to determine the direction of composition.⁹⁶ These two unions operated on two different planes, and they reveal a difference in the understanding of the artist to Stalinist leaders. The player, to the progress of this Soviet cultural project, was not so important.

Škvorecký’s explanation of Marxism in the pre-normalization political scene emphasizes

⁹⁴ Josef Škvorecký, “Jamming the Jazz Section,” *New York Review of Books*, 30 June 1988.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Starr, 217.

the formation of these “elite cultural institutions.”⁹⁷ A pre-normalization Alexander Dubček, though, would have disagreed. In his estimation of delivering socialism to the Czech people with dignity, he understood the importance of cultural institutions as actually representative of the population, not just the Communist Party elite. This, he would have said, is the purest application of Marxist socialist values. Other forms of cultural control were distortions of the Stalinist era. Therefore, Socialism with a human face was not just an economic and political philosophy. It justified institutional change within cultural institutions.

In 1968, Dubček collapsed these two unions into one: the Czech Musicians’ Union.⁹⁸ Over the next several months, facing the threat of dissolution after rollback of most of Dubček’s reforms, the union remained whole. Of course, the union was subject to the restrictions put on all other “cultural institutions” after normalization, but the musicians had always caused the Communist Party less trouble than the writers or journalists.⁹⁹ The Czech Writers’ Union had gotten much more attention in the international press as a bellwether for broader social change in Prague. The *New York Times* said the changes in various unions for writers and musicians made for a “new and healthier atmosphere” in the city.¹⁰⁰ The importance of union changes, though, was not so much political as it was structural. Now, the composers and professional musicians were part of the same organization and attending the same congresses. The institutional stratifications of musical class were gone. This integration also allowed for a home for jazz musicians, who had always been both performers and composers.

Some jazz fans saw the change as an opportunity. They petitioned the Ministry of the

⁹⁷ Škvorecký, “Jamming the Jazz Section.”

⁹⁸ Kevin McDermott, *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945-89: A Political and Social History* (London: Palgrave, 2015).

⁹⁹ Škvorecký, “Jamming the Jazz Section.”

¹⁰⁰ “Thaw in Czechoslovakia,” *New York Times*, 17 February 1968.

Interior for the creation of a Czech Jazz Union for musicians *and* audiences. The ministry denied the request, but allowed the formation of a special section of the Musicians' Union for jazz enthusiasts. On 30 October 1971, members elected composer Milan Dvořák as its chairman. The group got to organizing and promoting music around the nation. With the blessing of the Ministry of the Interior, jazz fans and players had found a home in the Jazz Section.

Václav Havel attempted to describe the allure of the Section in his memoir: “The Jazz Section is not in any way deliberately oppositional or dissident; it certainly did not arise as a conscious act of political confrontation. The people in it are simply doing their work well; in other words, they are doing what everyone, theoretically, could do. The regime felt threatened and indirectly condemned by the Jazz Section’s inner energy, by its departure from the cultural line, by its intellectual freedom, and moreover felt that it represented a scandalous flaw in the system of general manipulation.”¹⁰¹ Havel loved to discuss the spiritual power of music, but what is the nature of this “inner energy,” and how much explanatory power does it really have?

The physical headquarters of the Jazz Section was a private home in the suburbs of the city, several miles south of the official Ministry of the Interior building in downtown Prague, the building that ostensibly hosted all musicians’ unions. There, leader of the Section Milan Dvořák and associate Karel Srp gathered musicians, planned, and printed their own material. Those involved remember the excitement of action in that little house, especially just after the Section’s official establishment. In a section of his memoir, Srp emphasized the purpose of the group, writing, “Writing a manifesto? No, just doing the tasks.”¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 184.

¹⁰² Karel Srp, *Vyjimečné Stavy: Povolání Jazzová Sekse* (Prague: Pragma, 1994), 37. Srp’s autobiography is considered to be both a historical record of the Section and an attempt to absolve himself after he was accused of informing on the Section during his leadership. Therefore, some historians say the book is overly dramatic and sometimes moralistic, but his

Importantly, the Section was still deeply part of the Musicians' Union itself. It issued membership cards to interested parties around the country, listing the membership number, name, address, and signature of the member. The union had even established a satellite system. One member who lived in Olomouc, a city in central Czechoslovakia, established a local headquarters of their own, at a rehearsal studio in the basement of his home.¹⁰³ The musicians themselves were also encouraged by growing critical acclaim of their music outside of Czechoslovakia. SHQ Ensemble, the group that formed in the mid-1960s and played avant-garde jazz, released an album with Czech jazz singer Eva Olmerová called *Jazz-Feeling* in 1970, and it caught the ear of Czech and foreign journalists alike. They dubbed the singer the Czech Billie Holiday and claimed the future of inventive jazz in the nation was safe in the hands of SHQ.¹⁰⁴ All of the members were part of the Section.

The biggest undertaking of the Jazz Section in those early years was the Prague Jazz Days, a massive jazz festival throughout the city. The first, sanctioned in 1974 by the Ministry of the Interior, occurred over four days in March, during which the Section arranged shows for the biggest names in Prague for performances. In his memoir, Karel Srp recounts the difficulty of securing authorization for the festival with an administrator for the city of Prague. It was a

memories of the early days are nevertheless useful in understanding the attitudes and difficulties of Section members. For a more evenhanded account of the Jazz Section, historians use Vladimír Kouřil, *Jazzová Sekce V Case I Necase* (Prague: Torst, 1999).

¹⁰³ Jan Bluml, "The Jazz Section and its influence on the development of culture in the regions of Czechoslovakia before 1989: the case of the music scene in Olomouc," in *Jazz from Socialist Realism to Postmodernism*, ed. Yvette Kajanova, Gertrude Pickhan, and Rudiger Ritter (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2016).

¹⁰⁴ Mark Bastien, "Czechoslovakia's No. 1 Jazzy Lady Can Still Deliver," *Kitchener – Waterloo Record*, 29 December 1990. This review of one of Olmerova's sparsely attended concerts from 1990 recalls her stellar reputation from two decades before, but it also shows the state of Czech jazz post-1989. The reviewer finds a tipsy Olmerova telling the fourteen people in her audience at the Cultural House of the Czechoslovak Army Theater, "Take no notice, I'm just a silly old woman...But I can sing."

classic case of bureaucratic conflict, with the administrator reluctantly trying to discourage going ahead with the concerts, though Srp had already gotten the contracts. At one point, the administrator tells Srp, “You’re terribly wrong, don’t turn things around...I’m not against jazz at all...I like it better than you!”¹⁰⁵ The entire affair was almost denied due to unauthorized poster hanging on a telephone pole in the city center. Such was the nature of censorship during normalization. Husák’s regime relied on this bureaucratic process to frustrate the actions of “dangerous” individuals. This strategy allowed the censorship regime to remain fuzzy on the details. The machinery made the decisions, not any central power. This exchange also distills the Jazz Section’s difficult position as an authorized union that promoted unauthorized cultural activity. Much of their activity was on the fringes of legality, forcing the Musicians’ Union to crack down on their own organization, a decision it was reluctant to make. “Lawlessness,” Václav Havel rather dramatically wrote several years later, “has put on kid gloves and moved from the torture chambers into the upholstered offices of the faceless bureaucrats.”¹⁰⁶ Historians have, alternatively, pointed out that the group was simply not large or powerful enough to alarm the Ministry of Culture, at least not yet.¹⁰⁷

The drama of authorization, though, did not make for a particularly dramatic first festival. A theatre downtown called Radiopalac hosted the shows, not the bigger, more established Lucerna or Reduta venues. Interestingly, this first festival’s program mixed both organized state bands, like All Star Band and Metropolitan Jazz Praha, and bands closer to the underground

¹⁰⁵ Srp, 47. Srp says that his record is a direct transcript of the phone conversation between himself and the administrator, which had been recorded.

¹⁰⁶ Havel, “Stories and Totalitarianism,” in *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*, ed. and trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage, 1992): 332.

¹⁰⁷ Bolton, “Introduction.” See, also, the discussion of the Jazz Section in Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

scene—though mainstream enough to be part of the union. The ever-present SHQ Ensemble led by Karel Valebný played at that first Prague Jazz Days, right off the heels of their latest release. The Jazz Section bulletin from 1974 states that the purpose of the festival is to “document that jazz lives in our country as a relatively demanding...kind of music which has...focused the attention of young people.”¹⁰⁸

To be clear, Prague Jazz Days was not really different from the International Jazz Festival Prague, which was still an annual engagement during normalization. Jazz Days focused on Czech musicians and young audiences, and the International Jazz Festival boasted the best musicians from around the world and attracted a wide range of audiences, but there was no substantive difference in the purpose of the events: simply to bring jazz to Prague. In fact, Karel Šrp repeats in his memoir, in regards to the purpose and planning of the Prague Jazz Days, “We didn’t think we were any different.”¹⁰⁹ Things began to change as the group encountered a type of music that was bubbling up from small bars and clubs around the city. It was loud and shocking, eliciting the kind of response that establishment jazz had long since tempered.

When Rock Came to Town

Scholars debate the real nature of the shift in the Jazz Section. Of course, some, like Havel, think that its growing affinity with the dissent scene in Prague was in the content of their non-political action. “Living in truth,” as he would say, attracted the attention of the authorities. Some historians, and some members themselves, emphasize the political disagreement within the union’s own leadership between those who wanted to emphasize political dissent and those who wanted to stay the course of legal music promotion.¹¹⁰ Since the first years of its operation, the

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Šrp, 20-22.

¹¹⁰ Compare Vladimír Kouřil, *Jazzová Sekce V Case I Necase* (Prague: Torst, 1999) and Karel

Section had opened a printing press in its headquarters in the suburbs south of Prague.

Others make a claim that the change was first in the music itself. Rock was coming around to Czechoslovakia, both from American and British records and from Czech musicians themselves. The music was decidedly more confrontational than jazz. Could it have been—even more than active forays into dissent—a sea change in music that pushed the Jazz Section toward its eventual identity as an illegal and dangerous body?

To be sure, though, the younger generation of musicians and fans loved the new sound. Václav Seyfert, one jazz fan around the time of the rise of the Jazz Section, remembers attending a show to see a new group called the Free Jazz Trio. The trio was based in Olomouc and included members of the Section, and they tended toward rock, with a strong backbeat and electric bass and keyboard. Seyfert had intended to see the headliner, the more traditional, older Gustav Brom—a big-band leader with a 1940s sound—but he was blown away by the Free Jazz Trio. He recalls, “If I am to speak for myself, I have always been more of a rock music fan – our generation considered big beat, as we called it, the means of expressing artistic freedom, and jazz was after all decisively more academic. Maybe that’s why the Free Jazz Trio had such enormous appeal to me.”¹¹¹ From the beginning, the Jazz Section had prided itself on representing a young audience’s interest in jazz. It had, then, set itself up to be amorphous, shifting as the generation’s interests shifted. Rock, though, was certainly not part of the nation’s “rich cultural history” as jazz was.¹¹² It certainly was not established in the public consciousness as a valid musical expression, and it was never going to get past censors. The behavior of the musicians did not

Srp *Vyjimečné Stavby: Povolani Jazzova Sekse* on this question.

¹¹¹ Václav Seyfert, in Jan Bluml, “The Jazz Section and its influence on the development of culture in the regions of Czechoslovakia before 1989: the case of the music scene in Olomouc.”

¹¹² “Jazz 1,” 1.

help, either. In this “underground” scene—often made up of non-union young musicians and audiences—people wore their hair long, donned shocking clothing, and performed screams and wails to an eerie light display and smoke machine on stage.¹¹³ There was the spirit of improvisation in their music, certainly, but not the spirit of concert hall jazz that had grown in popularity and respectability over several decades. This was something else.

During the Jazz Prague Days in 1975, the leadership debated the inclusion of rock groups in the festival programming. Of course, this change was bound to come. Throughout the 1960s and the Prague Spring, rock and roll had been slowly seeping through the porous Iron Curtain. Now, young musicians like Emil Pospíšil, Petr Večeřa, and Tomáš Tichák were combining jazz, rock, and Czech language lyrics to create a new kind of expression.¹¹⁴ As the jazz-classical Third Way music had during the 1950s, this new jazz-rock confounded censors and excited audiences. A problem of top-down production of culture, as Husák was attempting in Czechoslovakia during normalization, is the life force of underground groups. They will always exist, Havel writes, and their art, by nature of its groundedness, will always be more “serious and genuine” than the state-promoted stuff, even if it is rougher.¹¹⁵ How, then, should the administrators treat a music that is half-sanctions and half-censored? The Section themselves, not to forget, was still under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior, so that question was also up to the leaders of the union.

The first major conflict involved a new event called the Jazz-Rock Workshop. Several

¹¹³ CzechVelvet, “The Plastic People Of The Universe - Run Run Run (1971).” 5 January 2015. YouTube video, 4:49. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ml7mjXP4HKQ>.

¹¹⁴ The lyric element would become important later on in the rock scene. Though many jazz musicians wrote compositions that included Czech lyrics, by far the most popular jazz tunes were American standards with English lyrics. Czech rockers co-opted the form and general attitude, but adapted lyrical style.

¹¹⁵ Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 126.

jazz-rock bands would perform at the next Jazz Days in 1975, if allowed, and expand the genre. Most of the leadership, though, was opposed. Karel Srp himself wrote that the opposition was a both “political fear, and professional jazzmen envy that ‘those jacklegs’, as they called them, will get more applause.”¹¹⁶ The rockers prevailed, though, and the next Jazz Days featured jazz-rock and a highly experimental group called the Free Jazz Trio. These changes are clear in the Jazz Section bulletin just after the festival. To begin with, the cover page of the magazine no longer featured a grayscale photograph of a relevant musician. Instead, it showed an abstract pencil sketch with no other text. The first page shows a full spread titled “Prague Jazz Days 1975,” featuring profiles and interviews of the musicians who performed, including Emil Viklický and Karel Velebný of the SHQ Ensemble. When asked about the changing landscape of music, Viklický describes all different types of jazz, jazz-rock, and rock as “one mood...it’s all the same.”¹¹⁷ As Viklický points out, too, it is a phenomenon happening around the world, with Herbie Hancock and Weather Report in the United States pushing the boundaries of the jazz canon closer toward rock and funk. An entire article in the bulletin is dedicated to the subject, titled “On the Waves of Classical Music and Rock.”¹¹⁸ This issue of the magazine also included a section of “New Books,” which listed published *samizdat* materials—many about jazz, but covering a range of cultural issues.¹¹⁹

It was a shift in both content and posture that made the inclusion of rock and other genres possible, the Jazz Section made clear in its revamped bulletin. Readers might have remembered the breathless excitement of the first issue which boldly proclaimed jazz “a rich cultural and

¹¹⁶ Srp.

¹¹⁷ “Jazz 15” (Prague: Jazz Section, 1975), in Jazz Section Archive, <https://jazz.ustrcr.cz/docs.html>.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

national tradition¹²⁰.” Just three years later, the language of the Section no longer sounds like the language of the government, championing tradition and national culture. The “new look” Jazz Section was much cooler—in content and in attitude. The extent of political change within the Section—and the underground music scene more generally—is subject to debate. It is clear, though, that the musicians themselves, understood the new rock scene to be a broadening, not a shift, that the Section could fold into its normal operations.

This ushering in of “underground” rock music to the authorized jazz scene coincided with the publication of a *samizdat* brochure, *Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival* by poet and dissident Ivan Jirous. His essay is part history and part philosophy, predating Havel’s language of “living in truth” to give a moral-political heft to the underground rock scene emerging in Prague. He claims that the third Czech music revival began in 1973, as rock bands started playing with regularity around the city. Unlike Srp’s explanation of the Jazz Section, Jirous understands the rock scene—even the music itself—to be essentially and primarily political. He writes, “Chiliastic moods always arise in times when people begin to feel that the spiritual repression from the world powers is no longer bearable.”¹²¹ He takes the criticism of Czech further than most, emphasizing that the problem is not just “consumers,” but “the people who live together in a mental ghetto that is not surrounded by walls, but it is scattered throughout an alien, unfriendly world.”¹²² Each section of the essay began with a quote from some great world figure, ranging from Mao Zedong to John Milton and Saint Matthew. Jirous was self-consciously tying his movement not just to the larger dissident movement, but to the Western intellectual

¹²⁰ “Jazz 1”, 1.

¹²¹ Ivan Jirous, trans. Paul Wilson and Ivan Hartel “Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival,” in *Views from the Inside: Czech Underground Literature and Culture (1948-1989)*, ed. Martin Machovec, (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2018), 33.

¹²² *Ibid.*

movement generally. The underground rock scene, and the group Plastic People of the Universe in particular—for which he was artistic director—could change the political trajectory of the entire nation and spark a moral revival. He could create a society that “desires little for itself and much for others.”¹²³ One might assume this claim is just the bravado of youth, but it was the same promise of 42-year-old Havel, who latched on to the Plastic People of the Universe as a political entity soon after Jirous published this essay.

Here, one can compare Havel—the master of art-as-politics—understands the Jazz Section and the Plastic People of the Universe differently. He lauds the Jazz Section for maneuvering around censorship while staying above ground, for making a political case for staying out of politics—for “doing their work well.”¹²⁴ But he says the Plastic People of the Universe had in its music “an experience of metaphysical sorrow and a longing for salvation” and an attempt to “give hope to those who had been most excluded.”¹²⁵ Karel Srp claimed the Jazz Section had no manifesto. Jirous’s *Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival* was Czech rock’s manifesto. At this time rock seemed to be the Section’s main concern. Opposing opinions on the inclusion of the music threatened to split the organization in two. The events of 1977, though, forced a larger question into the hands of Srp and his colleagues. They would finally have to confront the question of dissent.

The Crisis of Charter 77

The Jazz Section’s bulletin from early 1977 includes profiles of Miles Davis and Led Zeppelin and its usual roundup of the best jazz happening in the nation. The expanded scope of the magazine is obvious, but it shows no sign of the cultural crisis that erupted in January 1977,

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹²⁴ Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 184.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 127

right under the nose of the Section.

Two years before, and thousands of miles away in Helsinki, thirty-five states, including the United States, Canada, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and several other European nations, signed the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, widely known as the Helsinki Final Act or Helsinki Accords. Among several other things, the Final Act held all signatories to the language of principle seven of the agreement: “Respect for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Including the Freedom of Thought, Conscience, Religion or Belief.”¹²⁶ Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev had first considered the signing of the Final Act a great triumph in recognizing the legitimacy of Communist rule, thinking that the principle six—“non-intervention in internal affairs”—would cancel out the consequences of any violations of principle seven. Brezhnev, Husák, and other Soviet bloc leaders knew well the Western charges of “human rights abuses” against their governments, but this language had never been codified in an agreement they themselves signed.¹²⁷ They had effectively bound themselves to a Western moral authority turned international law, and they were not happy.

The Czech government itself, in an attempt to comply with the new measures, ratified the United Nations provisions on political and economic rights as reflected in the Helsinki Accords. They even made them available on newsstands around the country.¹²⁸ Around the same time, in the deep winter of 1976, the nation’s leading dissidents got to talking. Of course, Havel was there. He was still the spiritual leader of the artist-dissident movement, and, though he had been

¹²⁶ “Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe” (Helsinki, 1975), 2.

¹²⁷ Importantly, even dissidents in Soviet bloc countries did not use the language of “human rights,” often opting instead for “alienation,” “crisis,” and “authenticity.” See Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture Under Communism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 26-27.

¹²⁸ Bolton, 26.

banned from the theater after the Prague Spring, he was as politically active as ever and writing for Western audiences as well as Czech ones.¹²⁹ He had, in fact, just spent several months galvanizing support for members of the Plastic People of the Universe who had been arrested following a particularly popular concert.¹³⁰ He was gathered, now, in a Prague apartment with the other biggest names in *samizdat*. Ludvik Vaculík, the author of the “Two Thousand Words” essay that had galvanized radicals and split support during the Prague Spring, was there. Most of the intellectuals who were part of the Prague Spring were there, but the aim and the attitude were different this time. They had gathered to draft a statement of political rights of the nation and all the ways the Czechoslovak state had limited them. This language of rights was new to the Czech dissidents, and it produced a forceful rejection of Czech normalization and a call for immediate change. The document was Charter 77, signed by 241 artists, political dissidents, and writers, and the mood of the movement was changing. This moment was more an expression of anger than excitement, as 1968 had been, but it had plenty of manpower behind it. The Jazz Section was just at the intersection of these forces—the dissidents and the government—and the music was changing, too. Staying the course was no longer an option for the Section. Srp told members of the Section not to engage too much with the Charter.¹³¹ He wanted the group to stay legally part of the Czechoslovak Musicians Union. Any sustained official contact with the Chartists would lessen the chances of that. But more important that the direct contact with the Chartists was the dissent in the air. High-profile Czech citizens who were critical of the regime now had an organizing ethic in the dissident movement. Was the Section included?

Theories of Dissent

¹²⁹ Michael Zantovsky, *Havel: A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 2014),

¹³⁰ Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 126.

¹³¹ Bugge, 307.

With Charter upping the stakes of all even vaguely anti-regime cultural activity in Prague, the Jazz Section was now in decidedly political waters. Beyond the Charter, the Section itself was gaining popularity among Czech figures of the underground scene as an important cultural hub. It published samizdat about wide-ranging subjects; it hosted increasingly dangerous shows, and it created a network of dissidents that met regularly. The Party began to have a right to worry, but Jirous's declaration about the power of this new musical "revival"—one that championed rock, experimental music, and rebellious youth—brought an entirely new questions to the Section. What was the organization to do with this music, especially if its members were fans? And how were they to define themselves now? To understand, we require a detour to consider the nature of Czech dissent in the 1970s.

In *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt wrote that Communist societies are defined by three characteristics: "absence of factions, suppression of dissident opinions, and absolute centralization of command."¹³² Therefore, a healthy, non-totalitarian society relies on the free expression of dissent. And she describes the nature of this all-important dissent. It must be communal, functional, and dangerous to have any effect on the system of power it opposes.¹³³ This definition usually holds up fine. The "Two Thousand Words" essay from the Prague Spring and the public discussion it sparked, for example, meet the criteria. Some actions, though, fall in the cracks of these standards—not quite materially dangerous, or not quite organized enough to be communal or practical. In these instances, the actors themselves provide a tighter definition.

Dissent in Czechoslovakia took on a singular identity during the 1970s, and the dissidents themselves each had a different idea of what they were doing. Of course, Václav Havel wrote

¹³² Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Mariner Books, 1976).

¹³³ Arendt, "Civil Disobedience" in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 56.

extensively on dissent for several decades while he was a dissident himself. His approach was metaphysical and moral. In his most famous *samizdat* writing, he first outlined the stereotype for a Czech dissident: they are nonconformist, esteemed by their peers, intellectuals, universal in their message, and popular in the West. His own definition is much simpler. Dissidents are “individuals who are doing what they feel they must and, consequently, who find themselves in open conflict with the regime.”¹³⁴ Unlike Arendt, Havel understands dissent to be personal and almost defiantly *non-functional*. The action is spiritual in nature, only secondarily political. As always, Havel goes universal and opens up dissent to all members of society, not just writers or artists. But it does not provide a real, *measurable* definition of dissent, and one cannot ignore the real group of artists and intellectuals who defied the law by performing and writing for each other.

Ivan Jirous, the man who wrote *Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival* and led rock’s emergence into the underground scene and the Jazz Section, believed dissent was about artistic impact. Similar to Havel’s construction, Jirous’s definition emphasized the importance of state response to art. If the Party was threatened by a rock concert or a stage play, it was dissent, no matter the artists’ intention.

Historians disagree on the definition of Czech dissent, too. In *A Carnival of Revolution*, the seminal study of 1989 revolutions in Central Europe, Padraic Kenney says the term dissent is itself controversial—too grand to identify any specific action or community. More specific than Arendt, he points to three types of dissent in Communist societies that grew in importance over the course of the 1970s. There is “reformist” dissent, religious dissent, nationalist dissent, “civil

¹³⁴ Havel, “Power of the Powerless” in *Open Letters: Selected Writings 1965-1990* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 169.

society” dissent—the movement most closely associated with the Havel and the Czechs—and “counterculture” dissent.¹³⁵ Kenney classifies the “semi-tolerated” Jazz Section in the “counterculture” category. Though ostensibly part of the establishment, the Section’s music and publishing provided an avenue for curious Czechs “from alternative culture to alternative politics.”¹³⁶ Though not itself especially subversive, it was a gateway for unengaged people to find themselves involved in outright political opposition.

More recently, historians have defied Kenney’s categorizations. In *Worlds of Dissent*, a study of dissident and underground culture in 1970s Prague, Jonathan Bolton argues that dissent is not so much about the political action—drafting documents, speaking out against trials, and the like. Instead, the engine of dissent culture lies in what he calls the “shadow world,” the groups of people who had lost their Party membership in the purges and now relied on other means of artistic expression.¹³⁷ This world was built on “legends and stories” of these artists, and the attitudes from this scene eventually flowed upward to influence the big-name writers—Havel, Vaculík, and others. Most importantly, as opposed to Arendt’s and Kenney’s definitions, Bolton suggests that the gray area between political and personal expression is the truest kind of dissent. It defies categorization, even from its own audiences. Dissidents do not value its success based on the political change it encourages (because, of course, the dissidents knew their prospects were dim). Instead, the value might be, as Bolton suggests some dissidents understood, “a form of self-expression rather than political action,” always remembering, too, that that expression takes place within a larger “political life.”¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Padriac Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 10-11.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Bolton, 112.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 264.

Do the actions of the Jazz Section constitute dissent? It depends who you ask. One must not forget that the Section was still an official part of the Musicians' Union, even while it published *samizdat* and gathered dissident speakers. For this reason, a popular claim that dissidents stood apart from "ordinary people" is not a helpful distinction here. The official members of the Section were still members of the union, and therefore still part of the Communist Party. If membership in the Party itself was not enough to ensure that someone was loyal, then there was no real distinction between the ordinary people and the dissidents. It was certainly communal and artistic, but, as is the case with rock at the 1975 Prague Jazz Days, it was not politically functional. It also, though, worked within the existing legal structures to ensure survival. Did that slipperiness compromise its purity? Perhaps the Section as a whole is too big an operation to categorize. Its small but powerful publishing unit, churning out *samizdat*, engaged in direct dissent. During Prague Jazz Days, perhaps, concerts turned into acts of dissent when police arrive and the band continues to play. Bolton's definition of dissent is most helpful in the case of the Section, but his emphasis on the legend and stories of dissent in the Prague underground music scene does not apply to the organization, which was entirely above ground, institutionalized. Of course, through its rock and free jazz programming, it had ties to the "shadow world," but it never established the rock stars or performing legends that others did. It was rather mainstream. Therefore, we can categorize the Jazz Section as an organization that valued its own survival first, then operated in service of its members, who often held dissident attitudes.

Dissident sociologist Jiřina Šiklová described the broadly defined gray area. The people in the gray zone "consists for the most part of good workers, qualified, professionally erudite

people” who “perceived the errors of the socialist system early on.”¹³⁹ They “found it easier to resist the lures and the pressures from the establishment” and their “political involvement” is “minimal.”¹⁴⁰ This understanding of dissent is a departure from some other views, most notably Václav Benda’s “parallel polis” directive that dissidents should completely abandon all state institutions and begin from scratch.¹⁴¹ Dissidents should live entirely within an “alternative culture.” This option, he suggests, is for citizens who aim to change the state of their society but know that any drastic anti-regime behavior would be suicidal. Therefore, these parallel structures are meant to “supplement[] the generally beneficial and necessary functions that are missing in the existing structures, and where possible, to use those existing structures, to humanise them.”¹⁴² The difference, then, between Benda’s and Šiklová’s ideas of dissent are in the extent of *intent*. For Benda, the creation of “parallel polis” is a politically intentional act. Unlike Havel, the act is meant to be politically disruptive, toing the line of legality only in order to preserve oneself. In Šiklová’s “gray zone,” intent does not really matter. The individuals and groups within it are most intent on continued survival within a regime that has dampened their prospects.

Things were coming to a head. The Section leaders, especially Srp, were uncomfortable

¹³⁹ Jiřina Šiklová, “The ‘Gray Zone,’” *Social Sciences* 52, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 350. Šiklová was herself part of the ‘gray zone’ dissident community in Prague. She spent much of the 1970s smuggling *samizdat* in and out of the country. Most notably, she did not sign Charter 77, calling it “stupid” to sign the document officially, even though she expressed solidarity with the movement. She did sign it after her arrest in 1981. For more on Šiklová, see Bolton, 163.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 350-51.

¹⁴¹ Václav Benda, “Parallel Polis,” *Social Sciences* 55, no. 1 (1988): 222. Like Šiklová, Benda also did not sign Charter 77 at first. Historians cite his family concerns and the centrality of his Prague apartment for dissident meetings as reasons for his reticence. He did end up signing a year after the initial draft as an act of “solidarity” with those signatories who faced harsh persecution. See Bolton, 163.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

with with calling themselves dissidents.¹⁴³ However, Charter 77 cast a spotlight on the events in Prague, and eager foreigners looked to the city as a model for anti-Communist movements. A few days after its signatories released the Charter in Prague, the *New York Times* printed, above the fold, the translated text of the Charter in full.¹⁴⁴ The Section was keeping up its normal operations through all this—organizing and promoting concerts, printing bulletins, connecting jazz audiences to new musicians in town. The organization would not, it was decided, take up the mantle of Vaculík and the other most outspoken Chartists. Its leaders also, though, did not sign the Anticharter, a regime response to the international scene of the Charter. Srp and his colleagues hoped they could continue to thread the needle, working under the auspices of the regime while engaging in quasi-illegal activities. That balance, though, was becoming ever more tenuous. Something, in the decade ahead, was going to snap.

¹⁴³ Srp is clear about this point in his memoir. The book, which is partially an attempt to clear his name, might overemphasize his political ambivalence during his time at the head of the Section, but his partner Kouřil likewise avoids labeling the organization primarily a dissident group in his history of the Section.

¹⁴⁴ “Manifesto Charging Rights Violations in Czechoslovakia,” *New York Times*, 27 January 1977.

Chapter 3: “Come With Me to Prague”

“First seen in '64, a city then
of spires and malaise, with glints of jazz
and beatnikism in the people's gloom,
Prague in these more than three decades has changed.”¹⁴⁵

Over 150 young Czechs packed into the long hallway of the Prague Municipal Courthouse on a chilly March morning in 1986. They clapped in rhythm as the judge inside the courtroom read out the sentences of seven defendants. They were Karel Srp and Vladimír Kouřil—two heads of the Jazz Section—and five of their associates, Josef Skalnik, Tomas Krivanek, Cestmir Hunak, Milos Drda and Vlastimil Drda.¹⁴⁶ The organization had been charged with a violation of Article 118 of the Czechoslovak Criminal Code: engaging in an “unauthorized business enterprise.”¹⁴⁷ After a short trial, the representatives of the Section were all found guilty. During the sentencing, the judge was surprisingly moderate. He praised the Section for the work it had done for Czech culture but said the group needed “a legalized form.” He told the courtroom, “We don’t want to limit cultural activity in our country. We want to develop it better and better for a young generation.”¹⁴⁸

Srp was sentenced to 16 months in prison. Kouřil got ten. The others were placed on probations of various lengths.¹⁴⁹ As the group exited the building, they sang John Lennon’s “Give Peace a Chance.” Srp smiled broadly as the police pushed him into a waiting car and

¹⁴⁵ John Updike, “Prague Again,” *Americana and Other Poems* (New York: Random House, 2001), 52.

¹⁴⁶ Jackson Diehl, “Prague Judge Sentences, Praises Arts Dissidents,” *Washington Post*, 7 March 1987.

¹⁴⁷ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., “Can’t Prague Even Leave Jazz Alone?,” *New York Times*, 14 December 1986.

¹⁴⁸ Diehl.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

escorted him away.¹⁵⁰

In 1977, the Jazz Section's greatest threat seemed to be the long-haired rockers of the underground scene or the dissident movement that erupted with Charter 77. The group was straining to remain in the middle. Nine years later, its leaders were carted off to prison. What happened? Three parties involved each offer a different explanation. The Section, of course, says it was victim of one of the random state crackdowns of the early 1980s. The state itself says that the Section had become a pawn of foreign actors. The third group complicates things. It is a subsection of these foreign actors—public intellectuals, writers, and lobbyists from the United States and Great Britain who spoke about the Section as the ideal of political dissent and artistic expression. Some of these high-profile supporters—among them Kurt Vonnegut, Tom Stoppard, and John Updike—traveled to Prague to see the action for themselves. Many did not.

A Love Affair with Prague

“Come with me to Prague,” wrote American Kurt Vonnegut in the *New York Times* in December 1986, just after the arrests of the Jazz Section leaders. Vonnegut is writing in defense of the Srp and his colleagues, and he comes out strong. He characterizes the arrests as one of the “triumphs of life-haters today, of fun-haters today, of beauty-haters today, of thought-and-love-haters today, of the Forces of Satan.”¹⁵¹ The members of the Section are part of some universal brotherhood of artistic expression. His interest in the group comes, he says, from the small nation's production of a “major fraction of the Earth's most important architecture, sculpture, painting, music, poetry, theater, imaginative prose and most recently, as emigres, motion pictures.”¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Vonnegut.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

Vonnegut immediately places the Jazz Section in the global context of the Cold War cultural tug-of-war, suggesting that it is the duty of freedom-loving Americans to express outrage about the arrests. The Section, for him, occupies a space somewhere between the “political” and the “universal.” Political truth and universal artistic truth are, of course, completely harmonious, but one is always in service of the other. In this case, political change provides a path for some universal human experience. Indeed, the politics of the Jazz Section arrests are not the real conflict. It is actually a battle of temperament between “those who enjoy childlike playfulness when they become adults and those who don’t.”¹⁵³ Compare this argument to the attitudes of those American jazz musicians from the late 1950s who endured the difficulty of traveling through Eastern Europe to bring the American art form to citizens behind the Iron Curtain. As is clear in Chapter 1, that musical evangelism had political aims. It was a cultural arms race.

Only three decades later, the Western liberal conception of politics and aesthetics was the opposite. That cultural diplomacy initiative promised that artistic expression presents an inherent political (anti-Communist) message. Vonnegut suggests that any political “liberation” would be in service of a free artistic expression. Interestingly, though, Vonnegut mentions the actual music of the Jazz Section only in passing. He calls jazz “that magnificent gift of the black people of the United States to the whole planet.”¹⁵⁴ Apart from that specification, jazz is a shorthand for some perfect political-artistic combination that Vonnegut knows his readers understand.

The 1986 arrests made headlines in the United States and Western Europe.¹⁵⁵ The *New*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Barbara Day, “The British Philosophers and the Czech Jazzmen,” Contribution to the Colloquium on the Jazz Section at the Centre for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes of the Czech Republic, 21 September 2016. Day recounts the coverage of the arrests and trial in Great Britain.

York Times announced, “7 Leaders of Unofficial Czech Jazz Group Are Held for Trial.”¹⁵⁶ The *London Times* published an opinion entitled, “When the party tries to stop the music.”¹⁵⁷ coverage in the *London Times* was broadly the same as Vonnegut’s defense of the group. The Section existed, for the Vonnegut contingent, in the space between politics and aesthetics, justifying a political response to an aesthetic group.

A year and a half before his defense of the Section leaders in the *Times*, Vonnegut had visited Prague himself. In May 1985, the writer, who was already an American favorite among Czech readers, traveled to the city to meet Srp and other leaders of the group. The Czech government, proving the point of its own tolerance, allowed Vonnegut in and free movement throughout the country. During his trip, he stopped by the Jazz Section headquarters and publishing house, nestled in the basement of a home several miles south of downtown Prague. Along the street in front of the home, Vonnegut planted and watered a young sapling at the request of the Section.¹⁵⁸

A few months after Vonnegut, writer John Updike took a similar pilgrimage to Prague. He also planted and watered a sapling outside the Section.¹⁵⁹ After he returned, he published a short story featuring a fictionalized version of himself called “Bech in Czech.” Here, he provides some explanation for his infatuation with the city. “The city,” he wrote, “even under its blanket of political oppression, beyond the heavily guarded walls, faintly rustled with footsteps and small explosions of combustion, as a fire supposedly extinguished continues to crackle and settle.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ Michael T. Kaufman, “7 Leaders of Unofficial Czech Jazz Group Are Held for Trial,” *New York Times*, 21 December 1986.

¹⁵⁷ Richard Bassett, “When the party tries to stop the music,” *The Times*, 15 February 1986.

¹⁵⁸ Vonnegut.

¹⁵⁹ Vonnegut.

¹⁶⁰ John Updike, “Bech in Czech,” *New Yorker*, 20 April 1987, 49.

The Western liberal fascination with Prague and its cultural output had only been growing since Charter 77. Vonnegut's and Updike's trips was one among many during that decade, all dedicated to scoping out the aesthetics of the city in opposition to its political repression.

In fall of 1977, absurdist playwright Tom Stoppard arrived in Prague after 39 years away. "I talked to [Czech philosopher] Hejdanek in a cheap 'fish grill' just off Wenceslaus Square," he wrote about his first day in the city. "The fish was poor, the advertised desserts nonexistent, the ambiance pleasant, the clientele young, the music Western pop."¹⁶¹ His family had fled the country when he was two years old, but now he was back as a cultural ambassador from Britain.

He had come to visit the people he considered his new brothers-in-arms, considering the global news of Charter 77's signing. Some theater critics considered Stoppard to be a Western Václav Havel—both acerbic and absurdist, always with an eye toward political inconsistencies¹⁶². Now, with Havel the face of this international human rights movement, Stoppard traveled to Prague to write about the spiritual home of this new force and the incomprehensible context of normalization Czechoslovakia. He described the place as a "a weird, upside-down country where you can find boilers stoked by economists, streets swept by men reading Henry James in English; where filing clerks rise early to write articles for learned journals abroad."¹⁶³ This was the "shadow world" he witnessed, the community of day-to-day dissidents who had been kicked out of the Party and now lived parallel lives as workers and intellectuals. This was the in-between world of the Jazz Section, and these were the foot-soldiers

¹⁶¹ Tom Stoppard, "Prague: The Story of the Chartists," *New York Review of Books*, 4 August 1977.

¹⁶² Kenneth Tynan, "Withdrawing the Style From the Chaos," *New Yorker*, 19 December 1977.

¹⁶³ Stoppard.

of the movement Havel led.

While Stoppard was there, he met Czech actors and playwrights, students, historians—all of whom offered their take on the new Charter and the Chartists. In his accounts of his visit, he attempts a grand unified theory of Czech resistance and dissent. It begins with the music, he argues, of the Plastic People of the Universe, musicians as porto-dissidents. The energy of this movement grew, then, upward, reaching finally the most revered writers and philosophers in the country. Now, the bomb of Charter 77's human rights declaration has been detonated, and Stoppard says no one "believes that the situation, either for the government or for the disaffected, can be contained indefinitely. The question is whether the edifice will fall down before it blows up."¹⁶⁴

Stoppard, the foreign writer most closely associated with broader Czech politics, did not dwell specifically on the city's jazz scene, but the beats of his argument were the same. Political repression is the ultimate evil because it tramples on free expression—an action that is especially vicious when it stifles an American art form played by young Czech artists. A trip to Prague accomplished several goals. It conveyed the urgency of the situation, introduced American audiences to new dissidents and artists, and claimed to capture the Czech people's own hope about their future.

As these trips make clear, the movement was larger than individual writers' fascination in a jazz union. It comported with their imagination of a thriving cultural city, and it was rooted in a (sincere) faith in the harmony of artistic independence and political "freedom." Their interest was bolstered and complicated by an institutional support of the Jazz Section from political lobbyist groups in the United States and Great Britain. The deepest and most complicated

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

relationship was between the Section and a multifaceted educational and quasi-political group called the Jan Hus Foundation in London.

Founded in 1980, the Jan Hus Foundation operated education networks in Czechoslovakia and lobbied the British government to keep Czech anti-Communist initiatives part of its foreign policy objectives. The group, headed by Oxford University's most influential philosophers, organized underground philosophy lectures and home seminars under threat of arrest. In her 1998 book, historian Barbara Day termed the group the "velvet philosophers" and tells thrilling accounts of underground networks and close brushes with authorities.¹⁶⁵ The Foundation, though, also engaged in higher-level lobbying against the Husák regime. Like classical liberals, the philosophers considered the political action of lobbying necessary only in that it might bring about freedom of expression for Czech people. The Foundation's founding charter states that it is a "non-political... foundation, established to support education, culture and freedom."¹⁶⁶ The non-political aspect is not entirely accurate; the group's lobbying power was strong in London. Its belief in a political-cultural reconciliation, though, *did* comport with the Prague of Vonnegut's imagination.

One can easily imagine, then, why the Jan Hus Foundation, by the late 1980s a real political force in Czechoslovakia-Britain relations, supported the Jazz Section so vigorously in Czechoslovakia and abroad. The Foundation's website says its "extensive international campaign" of support began in 1986 as it branched out from philosophy to other fields of study.¹⁶⁷ Day specifies that this effort included pressuring the International Jazz Foundation to

¹⁶⁵ Day, *The Velvet Philosophers* (London: Claridge Press, 1999).

¹⁶⁶ "Statute of the educational Jan Hus Foundation," Jan Hus Educational Foundation, <https://www.vnjh.cz/o-nadaci/statut/>.

¹⁶⁷ "History since 1980," Jan Hus Educational Foundation, <https://www.vnjh.cz/o-nadaci/historie-od-1980/>.

openly support the Section, organizing a meeting between a human rights lawyer and Section leaders, “arranging for journalists and public personalities to write and publish articles and letters in the western press,” among other things.¹⁶⁸ The Foundation even arranged meetings between high-profile Brits and the leaders of the Sections. Karel Srp would usually show the visitors around Prague and the Section headquarters then accompany them to a jazz concert. Day recounts one of these visits in which Jessica Douglas-Home, a British writer and wife of *The Times* editor-in-chief, came to town and saw Czech flautist Jiří Stivín in concert. After her trip to Prague, she briefed Conservative Members of Parliament who were preparing for a summit on human rights in Budapest. One MP confronted the Czechoslovak delegation at the summit about the Jazz Section persecution, an encounter that was reported by *The Times*.¹⁶⁹ This network of public figures and institutions ballooned American and British support for the Jazz Section, and, because Czech records were not widely circulated outside of the country, much of this support came without hearing a lick of the music the organization promoted. It was an affinity of values.

The issue in Prague, according to some Czechs, was not one of Western values versus Eastern values—of course. Vonnegut argued that the arrests were a far bigger deal than one might imagine. Others closer to the Section, though, said that it problem was not bigger, but different. One person told a *New York Times* reporter, “I imagine, for foreigners, the whole issue of an allegedly conspiratorial or insurrectionist group of jazz fans must seem ridiculous. But unlike Poland and Hungary and unlike even the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev, the main struggle in Czechoslovakia today is over the right to independent culture, to spontaneous moments.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Day, “The British Philosophers and the Czech Jazzmen.”

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Kaufman.

The tone of these public figures is quite different even than the high-profile Czech expats who were, on the whole, just as opposed to the Husák regime. Czech author Josef Škvorecký wrote “Hipness at Noon” in 1984, introducing the readers of the *New Republic* to the Jazz Section. His argument nestles the Section into the long arc of Czech political history. The forces of artistic expression are pitted against “the Soviet state’s struggle against art.”¹⁷¹ Just two years later, though, when Škvorecký was in London and learned of the arrest and sentencing of Karel Srp and his associates, he wrote “Hipness at Dusk,” with the hope he had expressed in the first piece decidedly muted.¹⁷² After the Section members’ arrests, he writes that the state’s “bureaucratic *danse macabre* has had one sad consequence: the Section has been pushed virtually out of the jazz scene and out of most of its activities.”¹⁷³ However, even in his original piece, Škvorecký gives the Jazz Section discourse some nuance that the American and British outsiders never expressed. He writes, “If music fills a football stadium with raving youngsters, it signals danger. If it fills only a smokey jazz club with nostalgic middle-aged men, it is just a nuisance.”¹⁷⁴ The jazz itself was of only coincidental importance to the political inclination of its audience. Far from the underground rock scene, jazz was decidedly above-ground, and the Czech government understood that.

Václav Zluva, the press attaché of the Czechoslovak Embassy in Washington, wrote a letter to the editor responding to Vonnegut’s “Can’t Prague Even Leave Jazz Alone?” piece in the *New York Times*. He claimed that Karel Srp and company were arrested for not paying the organization’s taxes.¹⁷⁵ Czech people do love jazz, he says, and the artform has a long history in

¹⁷¹ Škvorecký, “Hipness at Noon,” *The New Republic*, 17 December 1984.

¹⁷² Day, “The British Philosophers and the Czech Jazzmen.”

¹⁷³ Škvorecký, “Hipness at Dusk,” *Cross Currents* 6 (1987): 53-62.

¹⁷⁴ Škvorecký, “Hipness at Noon.”

¹⁷⁵ Václav Zluva, “Prague Loves Jazz, but Not Tax-Law Dodgers,” *New York Times*, 28

the country. “Even lovers of jazz benefit from a peaceful society,” he writes, “we all do!”¹⁷⁶ Zluva’s letter quickly undermines the claims of Vonnegut, other writers, foundations, and entire government policies that jazz was a powerful political tool. Jazz might not have been as counter-cultural as the Section’s proponents thought. It was mainstream in Prague just as it was in the United States. Specifically, the Western proponents might not have understood the precarious balance of the Section’s legal status. Its distinct cultural power came not from its undergroundness but its ability to walk the line while remaining a recognized legal entity. In its music and its organizational decisions, the Jazz Section never really dealt in outright rebellion. This reality might not have been obvious to the foreign public figures in the Section’s corner, and it was almost certainly unimportant to them. The Section as metaphor had long ago surpassed the Section as organization in the West’s collective imagination.

To be clear, Vonnegut is not a political theorist or a spokesperson for the United States. But his attitude is basically the same as the other high-profile Westerners who came to Prague to see for themselves the group of rag-tag dissidents who had caused an international sensation with Charter 77. Why did this city, and this amorphous musicians’ union, capture the imagination of these famous men? Certainly, Charter 77—and the resulting anti-Charter that was a large part of the attention on the group. The document brought the struggle of Czech dissidents to the attention of foreigners, and it framed all the ills of Czech society in terms of human rights. However, the question of the Section was not only one of human rights and Charter 77. In his legal history of the Section, Peter Bugge notes that the Section’s official interactions with the Charter’s initial signatories were “were few and on an individual basis,” as Srp was “against

December 1986. To be sure, Zluva’s tax-evasion claim was the official stance of the Czech government but not entirely accurate.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

associating the Section too closely with the Charter” for fear of legal action against the organization.¹⁷⁷ The American and British fascination with the Section was partly, then, due to its ostensibly non-political ethos. The socialist realism that dominated Soviet aesthetics back in the early days of the Soviet Union placed political (or, more specifically, socially) potential on all pieces of art. Vonnegut and his ideological allies used similar reasoning. The power of the Jazz Section, to them, was in its inherent anti-Communism. Importantly, too, this quality was not really attributed to the music itself. In all the statements of Vonnegut, Stoppard, the Jan Hus Foundation, and likeminded folks on the Section, the actual music and musicians almost never come up. They are beside the point. The point is the *idea* of jazz—as liberating, dually guileless and subversive, and anti-authoritarian. Vonnegut did not need to hear the music to believe it.

Where Has the Music Gone?

The Western defense of the Jazz Section and the goings-on of the Section were only distantly related, and only rarely compatible. Sometimes, of course, Kurt Vonnegut or John Updike stopped by to plant a tree, but the organization’s programming mostly continued unbothered by the international attention—or at least not directly bothered. For sure, the public figures and their foundations were not all that bothered by the actual music the musicians played and promoted. In their several thousands of words on the matter, they make clear that jazz was music as metaphor and as activation energy. These were musicians as some proto-dissidents, exercising the purest form of rebellion and galvanizing their audiences.

Because of this attitude, the defenses of the group were completely compatible with support of other music coming out of Prague. A Western liberal might talk about the Jazz Section, jazz as an essential music of liberation, then experimental rock star Frank Zappa and the

¹⁷⁷ Bugge, 307.

essential countercultural potency of rock music. with no acknowledgement of the different musicians, audiences, genres, or scales of the two groups. Any cultural group targeted by the state occupied the same political space and held the same political power. What exactly was the cause of this outpouring of affection for the Jazz Section? The group had been conducting its usual business for a decade and a half before it gained international attention. Only in the late 1980s did it catch the eye of those public intellectuals from the United States and Great Britain, even as other elements of the Cold War seemed to be cooling down. The real catalyst was the Czechoslovak state.

The causes and effects are tangled up together, especially around 1984. Peter Bugge points out that the state itself became more inclined to pursue legal action against the Section because it was gaining international attention.¹⁷⁸ Most of the loudest support for the Prague jazz scene, though, came after the Section leaders' arrests. The reality seems to be a kind of incremental escalation. The Section gained notoriety, which made it bolder in its organizational actions, which brought more legal pressure, which attracted more international attention. The crisis was coming to a head, which spelt both excitement and danger for the highest profile jazz musicians in Prague. 1982 was the start.

Early in the year, the Jazz Section began to prepare for its annual Prague Jazz Days. Like always, the leaders had to first gain a permit from the Ministry of Culture to host a week's worth of concerts around the city. Unlike the years before, the Ministry denied their request.¹⁷⁹ This action was just one piece of this ramped-up campaign against the scene. The state's efforts stretched beyond the Jazz Section to the entire jazz-rock scene. The Czech musician-turned-

¹⁷⁸ Bugge, 293.

¹⁷⁹ Škvorecký, "Hipness at Noon."

novelist Josef Škvorecký wrote about the actions in a piece for the *New York Review of Books*. He says they included the disbandment of several bands; expulsion of the entire editorial board of a music journal *Melodie*, replaced by “know-nothing party hacks;” and a new exam requirement for musicians to obtain a license to perform, many of whom did not pass.¹⁸⁰ The Ministry of Culture also disbanded the Musicians Union and formed a separate group, Czech Jazz Society, which attracted the more traditionalist musicians—like those of the state jazz bands—who were put off by the progressive genre choices of the Jazz Section.¹⁸¹

As has become clear over the course of these several decades, the music scene and the literary scene were inextricably linked. Therefore, the state’s most concerted effort to undermine and quiet the music scene was through the press. Starting in 1982, the Ministry of Culture launched a campaign in Prague’s biggest newspapers and magazines. Letters to the editors, editorials, and stories expressed some sentiment of public distrust of the progressive jazz/rock scene and its promotion of unsavory ideas and lifestyles. In one such column in the weekly newspaper *Tribuna*, an editor charged that musicians and organizers “must realize that their activity grossly violates the principles of socialist cultural policy and consciously or unconsciously it serves the goals pursued by our class enemy.”¹⁸² The attacks on the scene mostly take this character—an argument of moderation against the extremes of the music and a protection of Czech national autonomy against the musical and political forces of the West. The music “only pretends to be culture or art, but is far removed from real cultural values.”¹⁸³ More of these pieces were published for the next several months, culminating in March 1983 in an

¹⁸⁰ Škvorecký, “Jamming the Jazz Section.”

¹⁸¹ Bugge, 306.

¹⁸² “Nova Vlna se starym obsahem,” *Tribuna*, no. 12, 1983.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

excoriating piece in *Rudé právo*, the official newspaper of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. This piece, published anonymously, finally provoked a response by the Jazz Section. In a 23-page manifesto entitled “Rock on the Left Wing,” Section member Josef Vlček skewered the state-sponsored defamation campaign, and the *Rudé právo* article in particular. “The person who wrote it was simply some kind of ox,” Vlček wrote, “who has probably never listened to a single record in his life.”¹⁸⁴

This attack on the jazz-rock scene is evidence of a mistake in the Vonnegut reasoning of dissent. That group of outsiders thought that the Section’s international appeal would be an argument for its utility to the Husák and the Czechoslovak state. A member of the Jan Hus Foundation in Britain wrote an open letter to the President just after the Section leaders’ arrests. The letter suggests the state had “a fundamental misunderstanding of the role played by the Jazz Section of the Musicians’ Union, whose activities have brought such liveliness and inspiration to the Czech cultural scene and helped make it an object of admiration throughout the world.”¹⁸⁵ This group thought that the Husák would be happy with the international attention on Czech arts. Instead, it was this Western meddling itself that the state resented. The Vonnegut contingent had something else wrong about about the nature of the Section’s actions. To that group of outsiders, Czech musicians were injecting a clear political-moral power into a drab cultural scene This may well have been true, but it is not how the Czech musicians or even the state saw the conflict. Based on this press campaign, the state was opposed to the music scene’s *amorality*, not its immorality. Besides, the state’s attempts were not really sticking. . Of course, there was a

¹⁸⁴ Josef Vlček, “Rock na Ledem Kridle” (Prague: Jazz Section, 1983), 15.

¹⁸⁵ Letter from Professor Donald Mitchell of the Britten-Pears Foundation to His Excellency the President of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic Dr. Gustáv Husák, 23 December 1986, quoted in Day, “The British Philosophers and the Czech Jazzmen.”

mismatch between the readers of *Rude Pravo* and members of the Jazz Section and its supporters; the gap was ever growing, too, as the Section grew in international fame. The StB would need to step up its efforts if it was going to combat the outside threat that the Section represented.

When it comes to the final arrests of the Jazz Section and criminalization of all its activities, the question of cause is impossible to answer. Some people say the Section sealed its own fate with the “Rock on the Left Wing” pamphlet, its open attacks on the StB and mockery of “traditional” cultural values the state claimed to uphold. The always-writing Josef Skvorcky offers this explanation in 1988, just after the sentencing of the Section leaders. He says the punchy pamphlet “seems to have sealed the fate of the Jazz Section.”¹⁸⁶

Historians Peter Bugge and Jonathan Bolton offer a subtler answer to the causation question. They each argue that, since the upheaval of Charter 77, the music scene in Prague had come to represent a Western liberal fantasy of proto-political dissent. Since 1977, the Section only grew in status—perhaps through no concerted effort of its own. It now sagged with the weight of the hopes of Vonnegut and company, the pride of Havel, even the popularity of its own *samizdat*. It now stood for more than it could withstand.

The Communist Party itself offers yet another answer to the cause question. It maintained that the crime was simply one of business. The seven leaders of the group were charged with violation of Article 118 of the Czechoslovak Criminal Code: engaging in an “unauthorized business enterprise.”¹⁸⁷ The prosecutors said the Section did not have a license to conduct any business other than that outlined by its duties as part of the Musicians Union. This charge

¹⁸⁶ Škvorecký, “Jamming the Jazz Section.”

¹⁸⁷ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., “Can’t Prague Even Leave Jazz Alone?,” *New York Times*, 14 December 1986.

suggests that the authorities were surprisingly *lenient*, allowing the group to operate in the legal gray area out of a desire to maintain peaceful relations with the underground scene. The regime, Bugge points out “much preferred to do without public martyrs.”¹⁸⁸ This ethos explains the eventual charge against the organization—violation of finance laws. It also, though, explains this slow ramping up of pressure of the Section, especially as the regime disguised the campaign as public outrage at the group’s cultural impropriety, not their political disruption.

The Musicians Kept Playing

The musician’s capacity to continue playing has been a refrain throughout this story. Through the whiplash of the Prague Spring and invasion, the annual jazz festival was only delayed a few months. The Jazz Section promoted Czech musicians through the most tumultuous party shakeup in decades.

One must be careful, though, not to conflate this staying power with oblivion. One must also acknowledge that, as the various stakeholders in the Jazz Section story crop up further and further from the Prague clubs, the music itself has drifted into the background of the narrative. Finally, one must not—in an attempt to reintroduce the music itself to this political struggle—equate the international engagement with dissent. These questions of dissent and passivity get quickly tangled up, and not just for the historian. The musicians themselves—and the Jazz Section in particular—attempted to reconcile their music with this new international spotlight, on stage and in print. Take, for instance, the Jazz Section’s bulletin no. 25, printed in June 1979.

To begin with, the magazine was now called *Jazz 25: Bulletin of Current Music*. Indeed, this issue opens with a short but perplexing statement of purpose not found in previous issues.

“What is Going on in the Jazz Bulletin,” the piece is titled, and it opens with an innocuous

¹⁸⁸ Bugge, 307.

enough claim: “Jazz and rock represent the most dynamic component of popular music over the past twenty years.”¹⁸⁹ But it begins to wander about. The three-paragraph piece mentions the Section’s evolving understanding of jazz “in the context of other progressive cultural trends” and suggests that the music “predicts, perhaps vaguely, the reality of tomorrow.”¹⁹⁰ Most strangely, the tone is one of careful apology, as if to correct some unstated misunderstanding. The final paragraph reads: “We reiterate that all this is meant to serve as a silent look at jazz, its history, present and development. But if some topics lead to a deeper knowledge not only of jazz, but also of other branches of culture, then our newsletter will fulfill its mission twice over.”¹⁹¹ The Section, it seems, was attempting to absolve itself of any allegations of ulterior motive, all the while assuring its more radical readers that the music itself has cultural power.¹⁹² The result is mixed.

For one thing, this strange piece of writing confirms the Section’s strategy from its inception—operating in the legal gray area to keep the lights on. It also, though, suggests a change in attitude at the Section. For the first time in its history, the group is offering a recapitulation to its readers. Recall the breathless wonder of the first bulletin’s introduction. The magazine declared, “Long live Czechoslovak jazz as music and a rich cultural and national tradition.”¹⁹³ Now, the group is pushing back on both claims: jazz as a point of national pride and jazz itself as a discrete genre, as evidenced by one article in the 1979 bulletin: “Art Goes to the

¹⁸⁹ “Jazz 25,” (Prague: Jazz Section, 1979)

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² Importantly, the piece never mentions politics or dissent directly, but it gets close. It suggests that jazz and rock “are helping to transform technocratic consciousness.” Its goal for the bulletin is a “confrontation of opinions and to the elimination of readers’ passivity.”

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

Streets.”¹⁹⁴ Here the magazine connects outdoor music in Czechoslovakia, like the Prague Jazz Days, to the rise of street art in the United States.

Here is a mismatch in the intent of the Jazz Section and the thinking of the outsiders who were so enamored with it. Vonnegut and company imagined a different kind of universality, one in which musicians were proto-dissidents, playing the music that moved them. In this view, the musicians are an innocent, even naive group prosecuted by the state. The power of the music, not the stated interests of the players themselves, provokes the Party’s anger. The reality according to the Section itself was similar but different.

As evidenced by the bulletin in 1979, the group is almost apologetic. Likewise, the form of the Jazz Section’s bulletins changed in the 1980s. They included no more photographs or illustrations. They were densely packed, serious essays on the biggest acts from the United States and Britain. No more breathless excitement about the socialist possibilities of jazz in Czechoslovakia. Most importantly, the Section began to publish *Jazzpetit*, a journal containing music and art criticism essays that often strayed into politics and philosophy. The music they promoted, too, was squarely in the rock and progressive jazz genres. One of the biggest names on the scene was Michael Kocab, whose concerts the Section often publicized. Kocab and his band, the Prague Selection, transitioned from jazz fusion to new wave rock in the early 1980s, and the Section followed them.¹⁹⁵ This drift into rock of course widened the Section’s base, but it diluted the group of fervent musicians who originally set out to protect their playing at clubs

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30-33

¹⁹⁵ Škvorecký, “Jamming the Jazz Section.” The Prague Selection was one of the bands whose public performances were criminalized during the crackdown of 1983-84. One can get a real sense of the change in the music scene by listening to the Prague Selection’s albums from 1980 and 1988. The first, a collaboration with that 1960s crooner Eva Olmerova, is a straight-ahead big band sound. Just eight years later, the group sounds like a cross between Herbie Hancock and David Bowie.

around Prague.

The decline of the actual music programming and influence of the Jazz Section just as its international profile skyrocketed might be a simple case of going mainstream. The Section's power during the 1970s, in those thrilling early years of festival planning and magazine printing, was its existence in the space between legality and illegality—both an arm of the machine and its quiet antagonist. Likewise, the change might have been a quirk of genre. In a change in cultural preferences in the 1970s, musicians breathed new life into jazz—what had largely become concert hall music. For these jazz fusion musicians, moving toward rock necessarily meant moving mainstream. It is impossible to say whether this shift was essentially political in nature, an attempt to move toward the most politically fertile audience—rebellious young people. The habits of the Section suggest that was not the case. Former Jazz Section member Marcela Krčmářová remembers that leader Karel Srp always advised participants to never “give the authorities an excuse to stop us from doing what we wanted to do.”¹⁹⁶ Of course, the authorities, in the end, did stop the Section. Though it continued in name through 1989, the organization lost much of its institutional power when its leaders were arrested. It also lost its designation as part of the Czechoslovak Musicians Union the same year.

Later on in 1987, 50 of Czechoslovakia's most famous public figures all wrote to Karel Srp, the leader of the Jazz Section. The letters were ostensibly to celebrate Srp's 50th birthday, but they each articulated a defense of the Section after its leaders' arrests and expressed solidarity with the movement. The Section collected the letters and published them together in 1988. The book reads like a homecoming of all the most important musicians and non-musicians

¹⁹⁶ Marcela Krčmářová, interview with Jonathan Bousfield. “The soap opera story of Jazz Section, Czechoslovakia's unintended cultural rebels,” *Calvert Journal*, February 2022.

of this story.

Ludvik Vaculík, the author of the incendiary “1000 Words” manifesto during the Prague Spring, sent his regards in an essay called “Dual Use.”¹⁹⁷ Celebrated Czech novelists Ivan Klíma and Bohumil Hrabal sent their best wishes to Srp and expressed dismay at his arrest.¹⁹⁸ Lubomír Doružka, the music critic who did so much to legitimize Czech jazz as an important cultural contribution in the 1960s and 1970s, also sent in his condemnation of the arrests. Egon Bondy, a radical writer and one of the biggest figures of the Prague underground scene, expressed his gratitude for the Section over the years. Jaroslav Koran, a signatory of Charter 77, even began his writing by quoting Kurt Vonnegut’s essay title, “Can’t Prague Even Leave Jazz Alone?.”¹⁹⁹ Even Václav Havel added his writing to the collection, waxing grandiloquent about the power of the Jazz Section to spur social change.²⁰⁰ Vaculík, in his essay, wrote that the harassment of the Jazz Section moved him deeply, “even more than the jazz itself.”²⁰¹ This is the root of the story of jazz in Prague.

From the early 1960s, the music had been a part of high society in the city. As the various political changes in Czechoslovakia dampened the cultural scene, the goalposts moved. During normalization, the music was, sometimes, politically threatening. After Charter 77 the dream of dissent eclipsed the power of the music itself. Jazz could only do so much, with its need to stay in the good graces of the regime. The *idea* of jazz was the real power.

The final page of Karel Srp’s birthday message collection is a collage. The top half of the page is an image of a man crouching within a cage with another photographer in the background

¹⁹⁷ “Dvoji způsob,” *Sborník k 50. narozeninám Karla Srpa* (Prague: Jazz Section, 1988).

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

capturing a shot from the opposite angle. The bottom half of the page shows fragments of newspaper articles and essays, seemingly about the Section. One can read the words “antimilitarism,” “international symposium of artists,” “change the culture” among the clippings. Stamped across the fragments is “PF 1988 Jazzove Sekce.” Above those words is a seal depicting a sharpened pencil with bird’s wings extended at full length. Above that is stamped in thick block letters “existujeme.” We exist.

Conclusion

If one roots around on YouTube long enough, one will come across a trove of videos of President Bill Clinton playing the saxophone. One of these videos finds Clinton in Reduta Jazz Club in Prague, 1994. Beaming and mustachioed Václav Havel thanks Clinton for his visit to Prague and hands him a tenor saxophone. Wearing dark tint black sunglasses in a candlelit room, he runs a few scales, then calls the tune. The band behind him counts off, and he starts playing Gershwin's "Summertime." The living is easy.²⁰²

This scene at Reduta has become a bit of a cliché for historians of Communist Czechoslovakia and the political transition of 1989, in which mass protests ousted the Czechoslovak Communist Party and ushered in a democratic government led by many of the dissident-activists of the past decades. Clinton playing a Gershwin tune in Reduta is an image of the intense manufactured optimism of the post-Soviet years and the American victory mentality to which most post-Communist governments happily subscribed, for a time. It is kitschy and a bit absurd, but it is undeniably hopeful. Havel's welcoming of Clinton at Reduta was part of his "responsibility of being a kind of curator for Czech culture, and that included cultures both high and low."²⁰³ It is a clear attempt to establish Havel as the political-aesthetic father of a new nation—one that receives the inheritance of Western Europe and the United States while establishing its own national culture forged in the fire of the Communist years.

But who can fault Havel and his colleagues for wringing every bit of metaphorical meaning out of Clinton's saxophone chops in Reduta? Five years after the end of Communist

²⁰² Clintonlibrary42, "President Clinton and President Havel in Prague (1994)(FOIA 2017-0412-F)," YouTube video, 1:10:08, 1 September 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdeV7pky1uE>.

²⁰³ Timothy Barney, "Citizen Havel and the Construction of Czech Presidentiality," *Communication Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2015): 597.

rule, both Havel and the United States foreign policy bloc were still largely heralding the transition as an unmitigated success. President Clinton was in Prague as part of a European tour meant to showcase American commitment to European security in the immediate post-Soviet years.²⁰⁴ Vice President Al Gore described the trip to a *New York Times* reporter as one “that can help make our nation and our world more secure in every way.”²⁰⁵

The Clinton team brought along the White House television crew to film the trip, which captured this Reduta moment. Havel, too, followed by a documentary film crew while Clinton was in town. Everyone involved understood the political-aesthetic upshot of a new Czechoslovakia, led by a playwright widely read in English, begun through a peaceful transition of power, in the seat of the former Soviet Union. The newly democratic Czechoslovakia—and the image of Clinton laughing and drinking with the beloved new President Havel—was an easy and needed win for him. Based on his statements, Clinton saw the nation as a kind of tabula rasa. The Czech president, for his part, told reporters in Prague that the nation was in “a time of a dramatic searching for a new order, an order in which no one would be subjugated or endangered and which would make it possible for all European people and states to live in an atmosphere of peaceful cooperation.”²⁰⁶

The story of Reduta Jazz Club since those days is rather fraught. It was the spiritual home of the Czech jazz scene since it opened in 1957. It stayed open through the Prague Spring and invasion and hosted the Prague Jazz Festivals for decades. It was a home for the biggest Czech

²⁰⁴ Daniel Williams, “Clinton Sips Pilsner and Sits in for a Few Riffs, Then Blows,” *Washington Post*, 12 January 1994.

²⁰⁵ Al Gore, in Douglas Jehl, “Clinton Going to a Europe Poised 'at Turning Point,’” *New York Times*, 9 January 1994.

²⁰⁶ Havel, “The President’s News Conference with Visegrad Leaders in Prague” (speech, Prague, 12 January 1994), American Presidency Project, University of California – Santa Barbara.

artists and touring acts alike—a place for the local scene to connect with the international scene. In this sense, it was the realized dream of artistic expression and an international community of artists expressed by the Tom Stoppard contingent during the darkest years of the Jazz Section. Today's Reduta is a far cry from those days. The club walls are covered in portraits of the jazz greats who have played there—Oscar Peterson, Dizzy Gillespie, Tony Bennett, and dozens more. The program, though, is nearly entirely tribute acts. Its website lists several upcoming shows: Tribute to Great Pop Singers in Jazz; Tribute to World Legends: Ray Charles; Tribute to Frank Sinatra.²⁰⁷

Of course, no one can stay on the cutting edge for long. Reduta led the jazz scene for several decades. It no longer needs to be the artistic home for the city's brightest young musicians. Newer, hipper clubs can do that. And, with its location in the center of town, it capitalizes well on Prague's ever-growing tourism. The club shows up on almost every "best of" list for Prague's nightlife, but some of the grandfathers of the Prague jazz scene have vowed to never play Reduta again, especially since the club's change in ownership in 2016 which (the musicians claim) entrenched it even further in the world of kitsch.²⁰⁸ A CNN story on Prague nightlife from 2021 calls the club "legendary, if somewhat grubby."²⁰⁹ Maybe its kitschiness is evidence of some true internationalism. In a perverted realization of the political-artistic dreams of Stoppard and Vonnegut, one can listen to gimmicky jazz now all over Europe.

But the 21st century trajectory of Reduta is not the only puzzling jazz story in town. Near the Old Town Square in Prague is an underground club called Jazz Republic. It boasts free

²⁰⁷ "Program," *Reduta Jazz Club*, 2023, <https://www.redutajazzclub.cz/program-cs>.

²⁰⁸ Emil Viklický (pianist) in discussion with the author, July 2022.

²⁰⁹ Ivana Kottasova, "Covid lifted Prague's hangover. Now the city wants to quit partying," *CNN*, 15 June 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/prague-tourism-livable-city-intl-cdm/index.html>.

concerts every night in a space decorated with concert posters of the best acts in its history. In the bar hangs a signed portrait of Václav Havel, with his signature heart drawn after the name. The Jazz Republic website emphasizes the Czech-ness of its programming and the essential educational project of the music.²¹⁰ This establishment, even its name, suggests an inextricable link between jazz and the political health of the nation itself. It presents itself as a link from the underground dissident past to the freedom of the present. Jazz Republic opened in 1997.²¹¹ Certainly, the beating heart of the Prague scene has moved elsewhere, at recently opened clubs like JazzDock, places that lay no claim to the revolutionary power of their stages. But the falseness of this claim has pushed these other clubs into backward-looking programming. Both Reduta and JazzRepublic bolster a vision of jazz-dissent that certainly no longer exists—and never really did.

Padraic Kenney's *A Carnival of Revolution* tells the story of 1989 in Central Europe. It is a history of the grassroots movements that led to the transition, and it tracks the lives of Central European citizens during the tumultuous days of 1989. "This book," Kenney writes in his epilogue, "ends at the very beginning of an era, and we must spend a moment thinking about what came next. The aftermath of revolution, though, sometimes bears little relationship to the struggle itself."²¹² Of course, this mismatch is obvious in the well-documented economic stagnation and political corruption that plagued these Central European nations after 1989. The effects of these difficulties were already dampening the 1989 excitement when Kenney wrote in 2003, and the gap between revolutionary ideal and reality has only widened in the years since. The "revolution" instituted no specific political ideology in the region, so each nation had to find

²¹⁰ "Info," *Jazz Republic*, <https://www.jazzrepublic.cz/en/info>, 2022.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² Kenney, 293.

its positive agenda outside of anti-Communism.²¹³

But the difference between “aftermath” and “struggle” of the dissent years is not just in political-economic reality. It is in the memory of the dissent itself. In the absence of a clear political success story growing out of 1989, a myth of dissent has taken its place. Take, for example, the responses of some former members of the dissent scene. They were happy to grab hold of the dissent myth as a guiding post-transition principle. In his famous “New Year’s Speech” to the nation in January 1990, Havel described the end of the Soviet Union and the collective power of the Czech people in almost spiritual terms, as he was wont to do. He praised his people, the ostensibly “meek, humiliated, skeptical and seemingly cynical citizens of Czechoslovakia” for finding the “marvelous strength to shake the totalitarian yoke from their shoulders in several weeks, and in a decent and peaceful way.”²¹⁴ One must be careful not to overstate the falseness of this dissent narrative. And, indeed, just because the story is politically useful does not mean it is wholly untrue. No one can deny, either, the power of this narrative for the Czech people themselves, emerging out of the normalization haze with no obvious orienting force to guide them.²¹⁵

Some high-profile Czechs, though, did not buy in. Karel Srp himself, the arrested leader of the Jazz Section and himself no stranger to the drama of the late 1980s, was adamant about this fact. “Historians, do not forget,” he admonished in his personal history of the Section. “Do not write foolishness about how discontent fermented, and how the nation raised its

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 305.

²¹⁴ Havel, “New Year’s Speech” (speech, Prague, 1 January 1990), Václav Havel Library Foundation.

²¹⁵ For more on the power of the dissent myth in the early post-Soviet years across Eastern Europe, see Gale Stokes, “1990 and 1991: The First Two Years of a Long Time,” *Walls Came Tumbling Down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 152-194.

head.”²¹⁶ Besides, anyway, rock and roll got the bulk of the credit for the political-aesthetic-spiritual force that propelled the nation through 1989. Tom Stoppard wrote a play about rock music in Czechoslovakia during the transition called *Rock n’ Roll*.²¹⁷ A then-graying Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones played a raucous concert at the Prague Castle in 1990.²¹⁸ Nine years later, the Plastic People of the Universe performed with Lou Reid at the White House.²¹⁹

At the beginning of this story, jazz was establishment music. The Czechoslovak Communist state had a state jazz band that performed in the nation’s best concert halls. As the context changed, so did the scene. Jazz became, for the first time in decades, politically dangerous again. The combination of normalization malaise and new progressive genres of jazz fusion made jazz shocking again, and made the lives of the artists dangerous again. Dissent and jazz scenes held hands through the 1980s, but they were never one. Srp and his colleagues were careful to tug on the reins of their organization to keep it legally viable through various crackdowns, and their arrests made them—considering this moderate tack—rather surprising heroes of the dissent movement. But in the end, rock and roll took up the mantle of the revolution. However, the memory of jazz-dissent—especially from the idealized dissident-artist—creates today’s Reduta. It brings President Clinton to Prague to announce the hope of a new Czechoslovakia, and it brings the Rolling Stones to Prague to congratulate the artists-in-arms on their shared victory.

Still, though, jazz was always in the background of these music-revolution celebrations. It was a precursor to rock and roll, a genre with a longer history and stabler scene in Prague than

²¹⁶ Srp, 238.

²¹⁷ Stoppard, *Rock n’ Roll* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006)

²¹⁸ Roman Lipcik, “The Rolling Stones’ Czech Invasion,” *Rolling Stone*, 4 October 1990.

²¹⁹ Mark Jenkins, “Power to the Plastic People,” *Washington Post*, 26 February 1999.

the young rockers of the 1980s, and, as always, it is rife with political metaphor: improvising, playing the changes, dissonance and harmony. Of course, these associations are not only in Czechoslovakia. Jazz is, as will the socialist realism which opens the Prague jazz story, fertile soil for a unifying theory of politics and aesthetics. The Czechoslovakia dissent-to-revolution myth holds hands with the myth of jazz as inherently political and essentially democratic. Nowhere is that myth stronger than in the establishment “high jazz” destinations of the West. In 2004, Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra in New York City, the most famous big band in the country led by jazz superstar Wynton Marsalis, hosted a concert—“Let Freedom Swing: A Celebration of Human Rights & Social Justice.”²²⁰ Scheduled just before the 2004 United States presidential election, Marsalis programmed a celebration of political figures from Eleanor Roosevelt to Nelson Mandela. The night included a premier of a new work of music and text: Václav Havel’s writing set to music by Czech jazz great Emil Viklický. *Mystery of Man* was based on Havel’s letters to his wife while in prison. The piece was a meditation on the spiritual effects of totalitarianism and the hope that one must stoke to survive. Viklický said that, certainly, he admired Havel, but he took the gig because he got a healthy commission.

²²⁰ “Let Freedom Swing: A Celebration of Human Rights & Social Justice,” *Wynton Marsalis*, <https://wyntonmarsalis.org/news/entry/let-freedom-swing-a-celebration-of-human-rights-social-justice>.

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Appendix

Below are music and artists referenced in the text, listed here alphabetically. In the case of an artist mentioned without a specific work, included here are their most representative or most popular works.

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²²¹ The Prague Selection recorded this album and others in the early 1980s, but the state ban on the band’s activities prohibited the album’s release until 1988.