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“Euphoria, Anarchy, Sobering Up”: The 1990s in the Memories of Alternative Czech Rock Musicians (and other Members of the Alternative Czech Rock Music Scene)

[„Euforia, anarchia, trzeźwienie”: lata 90. xx w. we wspomnieniach czeskich alternatywnych muzyków rockowych (i innych członków alternatywnej czeskiej sceny muzycznej)]

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Abstract

This article focuses on how the members of the alternative Czech rock music scene experienced the 1990s. It is based on oral history interviews with rock musicians as well as with music club managers, concert promoters, a music manager, and a publicist. The aim of the article is to outline the possible narratives of these actors about the era of the 1990s and map whether these narratives remain the same for the entire decade.

Abstrakt

Artykuł skupia się na tym, jak lata 90. przeżywali członkowie alternatywnej czeskiej sceny rockowej. Opiera się na wywiadach ustnych z muzykami rockowymi, a także z menadżerami klubów muzycznych, promotorami koncertów, menadżerem muzycznym i publicystą. Celem artykułu jest zarysowanie możliwych narracji tych aktorów o epoce lat 90. oraz odnotowanie, czy narracje te pozostają niezienne przez całą dekadę.

Keywords

rock music, alternative music, Czechoslovakia, the Czech Republic, 1990s, oral history

Słowa kluczowe

muzyka rockowa, muzyka alternatywna, Czechosłowacja, Republika Czeska, lata 90. xx w., historia mówiona



Czechoslovak rock musicians who were a part of the alternative music scene before 1989 often found themselves on the border between the official and the banned world.¹ We can see the beginnings of this semi-official music scene in the 1970s, when, after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, social conditions consolidated, which also affected the field of culture. At that time, culture came under complete ideological control, which was palpable in all areas of cultural activity. In the context of music, “retraining exams” (professional exams testing not only musical skills but also music theory and cultural-political knowledge) became tools of control.²

As a result of these changes and the implementation of the new rules, the “gap” between official and unofficial music (between the mainstream and the underground) widened. This void was filled by the alternative scene, sometimes also called the semi-official, independent, or non-commercial scene.³ The activities of this alternative scene were defined by several state decrees and had clear boundaries.⁴ The musicians (as well as the concert promoters, for instance) who were part of it therefore balanced between not only being at the edge of the official but, above all, the unofficial, and their bands and activities faced the threat of being banned.

However, these conditions changed with the fall of the communist regime in November 1989. The “lines” between the forbidden and the permitted became blurred; all restrictions fell; there was a general euphoria and freedom in society; and a “new” world became open (both literally and figuratively) to members of the alternative rock music scene. However, this initial enthusiasm gradually waned, and the “new” world began to change.

- 1 See, for example: S.P. Ramet, V. Ďorđević, *The Three Phases of Rock Music in the Czech Lands, “Communist and Post-Communist Studies,”* Vol. 52 (2019), pp. 59–70.
- 2 J. Vlček, *Hudební alternativní scény sedmdesátých až osmdesátých let*, in: T. Bitrich, J. Alan (eds.), *Alternativní kultura. Příběh české společnosti 1945–1989*, Praha 2001, p. 206. For more information about the conditions in the music scene in the 1970s, see: S.P. Ramet, *Rock Music in Czechoslovakia*, in: S.P. Ramet (eds.), *Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia*, Boulder 1994, pp. 58–61.
- 3 I use these expressions interchangeably throughout the text.
- 4 These decrees regulated, for example, the process of establishing music ensembles, organising musical performances, and the financial remuneration for these performances; Vyhláška ministerstva školství a kultury č. 112/1960 Sb., o zřizování a činnosti souborů hudebníků z povolání a souborů lidových hudebníků, <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/1960-112> (accessed: 27.08.2021); Vyhláška ministerstva kultury České socialistické republiky č. 110/1981 Sb., o úpravě odměn za hudební činnost vykonávanou členy souborů lidových hudebníků, <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/1981-110> (accessed: 01.09.2019).

Although the topic of alternative rock music in Czechoslovakia is relatively popular among researchers, most scholars devote their studies only to the period up until 1989,⁵ meaning that the development of this scene in the 1990s is still not sufficiently mapped. However, in recent years this trend is beginning to change, and research focusing on post-socialist culture and music is gradually increasing.⁶ This article also contributes to this mosaic, offering the perspective of members of the alternative rock music scene, i.e. concert promoters, music club managers, a music manager, and a music publicist, but especially musicians, who founded their bands in the late 1970s and during the 1980s and who played mainly punk.⁷ This genre, which had established itself in Czechoslovakia by the late 1970s and was classified by the representatives of the regime as “undesirable groups” in socialist society, became a highly sought-after commodity in the first post-socialist years.⁸ Therefore, punk bands frequently played at newly established music clubs in the 1990s. In this respect, I use them as an “illustrative example” to demonstrate some trends evident within the alternative rock music scene of the 1990s (with reference to some specifics that are related to punk).⁹

By using the oral history method, the main research objective is to describe what the members of the alternative rock music scene thought the 1990s were like and how they remember the 1990s. Considering the fact that research on Czech alternative music of the 1990s is limited by the scarcity of research on the topic and the availability of some sources (including archival materials that are subject to a thirty-year protection period in the Czech Republic),¹⁰ oral history represents

5 Not only Czech, but publications in other languages can also be mentioned in this respect. See for example: M. Vaněk, *Byl to jenom rock n'roll. Hudební alternativa v komunistickém Československu 1956–1989*, Praha 2010; S.P. Ramet, *Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia*, Boulder 1994.

6 For example, the project of the Center for the Study of Popular Culture “The Brave New World: Youth, Music and Class in Czech Postsocialism,” <https://brave-new-world.cspk.eu/> (accessed: 01.07.2022).

7 According to other researchers who focus on subcultures and music scenes, it is possible to include not only active musicians, but also, for example, their fans and concert promoters among the members of the scene. See, for example: D. Hesmondhalgh, *Recent Concepts in Youth Cultural Studies: Critical Reflections from the Sociology of Music*, in: P. Hodgkinson, W. Deicke, *Youth Cultures: Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes*, New York 2007, p. 41; O. Císař, M. Koubek, *Include 'Em All? Culture, Politics and a Local Hardcore/Punk Scene in the Czech Republic*, “Poetics: Journal of Empirical Research on Literature, the Media and the Arts,” Vol. 40 (1/2012), p. 8; M. Kolářová, *Hudební subkultury mládeže v současné ČR – postsubkulturní a postsocialistické?*, in: O. Daniel, T. Kavka, J. Machek (eds.), *Populární kultura v českém prostoru*, Praha 2013, p. 233.

8 See, for example: L. Marková, *Plzeňská alternativní hudební scéna v letech 1983–1995*, PhD thesis, Prague 2020, pp. 43, 108.

9 Therefore, I will continue to use the phrase “alternative rock music scene” in the article.

10 Zákon č. 499/2004 Sb., zákon o archivnictví a spisové službě a o změně některých zákonů, <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2004-499> (accessed: 14.06.2022).

valuable source. Moreover, the life stories and experiences of musicians and other members of the alternative rock music scene are important for the comprehensive mapping of its development not only before 1989, but also for the post-socialist transformation.

The starting point of my research is a content analysis of semi-structured oral history interviews with punk musicians especially from the alternative rock scenes in West Bohemia, but also from North Bohemia and Prague, which were conducted between the years 2018 and 2022. The West Bohemian scene was one of the most developed in Czechoslovakia, and apart from hard rock bands, it was home to a relatively large number of punk bands (as well as heavy metal bands in the late 1980s), which were also active in the following years. Moreover, some bands that became nationally known emerged from the West Bohemian scene (for example, a Znouzectnost). The North Bohemian scene and the Prague scene, which gave rise to such nationally as well as internationally known bands such as Už jsme doma, Garáž, or Jasná páka, are also significant. I have supplemented the musicians' narratives with oral history interviews with other members of the alternative rock music scene, such as the managers of music clubs, concert promoters, a music publicist, and a music manager. Music club managers and music managers were also part of the alternative rock music scene, mostly as their fans and in some cases also as the organisers of concerts before 1989. After the Velvet Revolution, they founded their own music clubs or worked in the music industry and became important participants in the transformation of the alternative rock music scene. Music publicist narrators bring a comprehensive overview to the subject, as they are not influenced by the everyday life of musicians.

I mainly used the concept of collective memory as a set of generally shared ideas and (subjective) memories of the group itself.¹¹ I have placed the information from the interviews (whether it is explicitly or implicitly mentioned) into the historical context of the 1990s and compared this with other sources. By using the memories and experiences of the members of the alternative rock music scene, already published interviews, the autobiographies of musicians from this scene, and secondary literature, I outline the possible narratives of musicians and other members of the alternative rock music scene in Czechoslovakia in the 1990s and map whether these narratives remained the same for the entire decade.¹²

11 For more information about collective memory, see, for example: M. Halbwachs, *Kolektivní paměť*, Praha 2010; J. Assmann, *Kultura a paměť. Písmo, vzpomínka a politická identita v rozvíjených kulturách starověku*, Praha 2001, pp. 36–37.

12 In some respects, this article develops the findings of my doctoral research, which was devoted to the Pilsen alternative music scene between 1983 and 1995. For more information, see: L. Marková, *Plzeňská alternativní hudební scéna v letech 1983–1995*, PhD thesis, Prague 2020.

A stain on Czechoslovak society versus the new mainstream

To better understand the changes in the Czech (Czechoslovak) alternative rock music scene in the 1990s, it is necessary to go back to its beginnings. The Czechoslovak alternative scene was established in the early 1970s and consisted of performers who preferred their own “independent” production to commercial success. They wanted to create “freely” and without being restricted by communist officials and the representatives of the record and media industries. They therefore did not want to (or could not) be professional musicians and thus make a living from music.¹³

At the same time, however, unlike the Czechoslovak underground, they did not want to play illegally.¹⁴ They wanted to play for an audience and did not mind occasionally performing on official or semi-official platforms (such as the Socialist Youth Union). This scene was not limited in genre and included anyone who did not want to or could not be part of the mainstream or the underground. Consequently, some of the rock bands, especially those which, unlike their mainstream colleagues, did not make a living from music, were against the mainstream and wanted to be as little dependent as possible on the established mainstream system, were part of this scene.

The bands Extempore and Stehlík and Švehlík are considered protagonists of the alternative rock music scene. Later, the first punk and new wave bands such as Zikkurat or Pražský výběr joined them.¹⁵ In addition to Prague, these bands were formed in other regions of Czechoslovakia as well. The Brno scene was also significant (*Ještě jsme se nehohodli* and *Pro pocit jistoty*), as were the West Bohemian scene (*Znouzectnost*, *Požar mlýna*) and the North Bohemian scene (*F.P.B.*, *Už jsme doma*).¹⁶ Some heavy metal bands, namely the black metal bands Root and Törr, were also a part of alternative rock music scene in the late 1980s.¹⁷

These alternative bands often played as semi-professional or amateur ensembles,¹⁸ which could influence their musical everyday lives.¹⁹ In some instances, they had

13 This distinguished them from the mainstream (official) scene and interpreters, whose music was played on the radio and television and who made a living from music.

14 In the context of Czechoslovakia, the underground was defined as a relatively closed group of people who avoided any contact with the establishment; P. Hrabalík, *Vztahy alternativní scény k jiným rockovým směrům*, <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/specialy/bigbit/clanky/150-vztahy-alternativni-sceny-k-jinym-rockovym-smerum/> (accessed: 04.07.2022).

15 A. Opekar, *Základní vývojové tendence v české rockové hudbě, 2. část, 70. léta*, “Hudební rozhledy,” Vol. 12 (1990), p. 569.

16 J. Vlček, *op. cit.*, pp. 253–254; L. Marková, *op. cit.*, pp. 46–51; A. Opekar, J. Vlček, *Excentrici v přízemí*, Praha 1989, pp. 94–96.

17 J. Vlček, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

18 This means that unlike the official scene, they were not professional musicians and could not make a living from music.

19 For example, when they were acquiring musical instruments, which they bought in second-hand goods store, or made them themselves because new musical instruments were very expensive. According to some musicians, the price of an instrument from the second-

a so-called “establisher” (an institution that took responsibility for the ensemble and oversaw its ideological safety),²⁰ which was an essential part of the “official” functioning of the band and the performance. Thanks to these “establishers,” the bands were also able to get rehearsal rooms. According to West Bohemian musicians, however, they often had to find rehearsal rooms themselves. Therefore, they rehearsed in various spaces such as garages, cellars, pubs, etc. In some cases, the bands also had so-called “retraining exams,” thanks to which they could receive a fee set by the state for the performance.²¹ Such “retraining exams” were typical mainly for hard rock bands and some of the heavy metal bands (especially for those which played at “dance parties”). With some exceptions, punk bands tried to avoid them, because they represented “compromise” with the regime. However, music was not their main source of income.²²

From its inception, officials of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and the official media perceived alternative rock music in general very negatively.²³ They criticised the scene’s “connection” to Western culture, represented by the English names of bands or by the lyrics as well as the unusual image of the musicians, such as long hair for rockers and metalheads or mohawks for punks. Therefore, the efforts to control and suppress alternative rock music by the authorities persisted through campaigns, for instance.²⁴ One such campaign focused on suppressing punk and originated in the 1980s. At that time, the festival called *Pražské jazzové dny* (“Prague Jazz Days”), which also provided space for punk bands, was cancelled.

Other campaigns against punks followed (for example, Trojan’s list, which contained several dozen bands from the Prague area whose activities were

hand goods store was similar to one month’s salary, while the price of a new instrument was many times higher. See: T. Cidlina, *I can’t get no. Českolipská satisfakce*, Česká Lípa 2016, pp. 162–164.

20 According to the Decree of the Ministry of Education and Culture No. 112/1960 Coll., ensembles could be “established” by collective farms, awareness institutions of National Committees, trade unions, and many other such institutions; *Vyhlaška ministerstva školství a kultury č. 112/1960 Sb., O zřizování a činnosti souborů hudebníků z povolání a souborů lidových hudebníků*, <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/1960-112> (accessed: 27.08.2021).

21 On the issue of “retraining exams” and the “establisher” of Czechoslovak bands, see: P. Houda, *Pódia znovu jen pro prověřené. “Normalizace” oficiální populární hudby v Československu 70. let*, “Soudobé dějiny/Czech Journal of Contemporary History”, Vol. 18 (3/2011), pp. 310–329.

22 This is different from the professional rock musicians, who made a living from music and therefore had to pass “retraining exams” in the category for professional musicians.

23 See: M. Husák, *Rock Music Censorship in Czechoslovakia between 1969 and 1989*, “Popular Music and Society”, Vol. 40 (3/2017), pp. 310–329.

24 S.P. Ramet, V. Ďorđević, *op. cit.*, pp. 63–67.

to be banned).²⁵ The March 1983 article *Nová vlna se starým obsahem* (“New Wave with Old Content”), which criticised the songs and lyrics, among others, of rock bands (primarily punk and new wave bands) and appealed to cultural officers not to allow the productions of these bands, was the culmination of these campaigns.²⁶ After publishing this article, the number of bands reduced.

This approach began to change in the mid-1980s, when rock music was given more official space through initiatives such as Rockfest, the national festival for amateur rock music where punk bands could also perform.²⁷ However, these bands performed rather sporadically and for a limited number of fans before 1989. They could perform, for example, in Prague’s Junior club Na Chmelnici, where the band Jasná Páka (Hudba Praha) but also Pražský výběr, Visací zámek, Garáž, Psi vojáci, and other bands from the alternative rock music scene performed.²⁸ They were also permitted to perform in pubs or arts’ centres (for example, the House of Culture in Prague – Opatov, or in the Dům barikádníků in Prague 10).²⁹ The concerts of these bands were often organised by people who liked rock music but did not have many opportunities to listen to it live. Therefore, they decided to organise some concerts and attempted to do so under the “patronage” of various official organisations such as the Socialist Youth Union.³⁰

I had experience with the Socialist Youth Union, I knew that the Socialist Youth Union could authorize the concert, and based on it the National Committee signed the permit to realize it. So, I went to ask the guys in charge of the [local branch of the] Socialist Youth Union and they said – “Sure, great, just do it.” Some of them were even interested in it, they wanted to go to the concert.³¹

According to the Czech political scientist Josef Smolík, whose research includes various youth subcultures, the concerts of punk groups were mainly attended by the young generation: high school students or young workers.³²

25 M. Valenta, F. Stárek, *Podzemní symfonie Plastic People*, Praha 2008, p. 204.

26 J. Krýzl, *Nová vlna se starým obsahem*, “Tribuna,” Vol. 15 (12/1983), p. 5. For more information, see, for example: L. Marková, *op. cit.*, pp. 43–45.

27 For more information, see: M. Valenta, *Konečně Rockfest! Proměny mechanismů kontroly amatérské rockové hudby v 80. letech 20. století*, “Securitas imperii,” Vol. 30 (2017), pp. 278–300.

28 Junior club Na Chmelnici was subordinated to the House of Culture, District Prague 3.

29 M. Vaněk, *op. cit.*, pp. 472–480.

30 Rock festivals in Ostrov nad Ohří (Northwest Bohemia) were where the already-mentioned punk band Visací zámek, for instance, performed. ÚSD COH, sig. ALT_02, Interview with F. V., recorded by Lucie Marková, Zoom, 21.01.2022. In the case of oral history interviews, the author of this study is mentioned by her maiden name Marková.

31 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_02, Interview with F.V., recorded by Lucie Marková, Zoom, 21.01.2022.

32 S.P. Ramet, V. Ďorđević, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

These bands also did not have many opportunities to record their music. If they had any recordings, they were mostly amateur tapes distributed among fans.³³ However, these practices changed with the fall of the communist regime in November 1989. The process of democratisation, which began in 1990, brought about a general relaxation of restrictions and social changes, which were evident in the music scene as well. In April 1990, Decree No. 139/1990 Coll. repealed the previous decrees of the Ministry of Education and Culture on the establishment and activities of professional music ensembles and folk music ensembles and on the adjustment of remuneration for musical activities performed by members of folk music ensembles. This decree thus erased all limits on their musical activities.³⁴ It was no longer necessary for musicians to have an “establisher” or “retraining exams;” they could then perform anytime and almost anywhere in the country without restrictions. The fee for the performance was no longer limited, and they could set it themselves. However, as club managers have mentioned, nobody thought about the economic profit of concerts in the early 1990s.³⁵

Additionally, the high demand for everything that had been banned before 1989 began to be evident in society.³⁶ In case of the musical environment, bands that had previously been a part of the alternative scene began to come to the fore.

We are talking about the early 1990s, when very unusual things were happening, for example, a lot of the pre-revolutionary music stars retreated because of people’s complete loss of interest in them... Some of them completely ceased activities and so on. And new performers have just taken their place, including representatives of the absolutely unconventional and non-commercial scene...³⁷

33 However, there were exceptions, such as the punk band *Visací zámek*, which released a record through the music publishing house Supraphon, before 1989. See: F. Fuchs, *Kytary a řev, aneb co bylo za zdí*, Říčany u Brna 2002, p. 232.

34 Vyhláška ministerstva kultury České republiky č. 139/1990 Sb., o zrušení některých předpisů v odvětví kultury, <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/1990-139/zneni-19900428#Top> (accessed: 20.12.2019).

35 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_06, Interview with A. B. and S. F., recorded by Lucie Marková, Prague, 07.04.2022.

36 This trend was also evident, for example, in Czech theatres, where dramas by once banned authors were popular in the early 1990s. For more information, see: L. Jungmannová, L. Vodička, *České drama v letech 1989–2010*, Praha 2016. For theatre attendance, see also the statistics of the National Information and Consulting Centre for Culture; for example: *Kultura České republiky v číslech. Vybrané údaje ze statistických šetření*, Praha 2013, also available at https://kultura.praha.eu/public/a4/fa/bf/1855837_489688_Kultura13.pdf (accessed: 15.6.2022).

37 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_01, Interview with P. K., recorded by Lucie Marková, Prague, 04.01.2022.

The representatives of the mainstream, consisting especially of pop musicians, were put aside in the early 1990s³⁸ and were “replaced” by new performers from the alternative scene.

The managers of music clubs, which had been established since the early 1990s across the country, used this interest in the “alternative.” People who had tried to organise concerts for alternative rock bands (including punk ones) before 1989 were among the managers or dramaturgs of these clubs, so they simply continued their activities in the 1990s. Therefore, we can see bands such as Hudba Praha, Už jsme doma, Psí vojáci, Visací zámek, and Garáž but also Znouzectnost, Požár mlýna and other bands in the programmes of music clubs during the early 1990s. Apart from punk bands, other names from the rock scene also appeared in the clubs, such as Vladimír Mišík & etc, or Mňága and Žďorp.³⁹ Some of these bands managed to achieve national fame by regularly performing in clubs (for example, the band Znouzectnost).⁴⁰

Alternative rock music was also getting more attention in the media as it attempted to catch up with its previous deficit. Not only did the newly founded music magazines (one of the most famous being “Rock&Pop”)⁴¹ report on rock music; radio and television did as well.⁴² In addition, rock music was now also available in the form of records, which the newly established music publishing houses started to release.⁴³ Moreover, the monopoly that state agencies had over the regulation of musicians was also abolished. Many private companies were established, which

38 See, for example: P. Klusák, *Gott. Československý příběh*, Brno 2021, pp. 383–384; O. Bezr, *Vzpomínky na současnost*, in: T. Weiss (ed.), *Beaty, bigbeaty, breakbeaty*, Praha 1998, p. 280.

39 There were many bands in the alternative rock music scene after 1989. A complete list of them is not the primary objective of this study. Therefore, only some of the most prominent actors of this scene are presented here.

40 *Punk a metal místo nekonfliktních popíkářů. Fenoménem devadesátých let byly hudební kluby*, <https://podcasty.seznam.cz/podcast/tema-plus/punk-a-metal-misto-nekonfliktnich-popikaru-fenomem-devadesatych-let-byly-hudebni-kluby-21913> (accessed: 08.09.2022).

41 The music magazine “Rock&Pop” focuses on rock and pop music. Its first issue was published in May 1990 with a print run of 110,000 copies; O. Daniel (ed.), *Kultura svépomocí. Ekonomické a politické rozměry v českém subkulturním prostředí pozdního státního socialismu a postsocialismu*, Praha 2016, p. 135.

42 In 1990, MTV began broadcasting in Czechoslovakia, and music videos could also be viewed on the Czechoslovak television channel OK3; S.P. Ramet, *Rock music in Czechoslovakia*, p. 69; B. Kōpplová (ed.), *Dějiny českých médií v datech /rozhlás, televize, mediální právo*, Praha 2003.

43 Globus and Monitor were among the first publishing houses focusing on domestic alternative rock music; S.P. Ramet, *Rock Music in Czechoslovakia*, p. 68; Monitor was founded shortly after November 1989 and published mainly domestic punk, hardcore, and metal bands; for example, the *Rebelie (Punk ů Oi)* album, composed of recordings by eight groups (among them, for example, Plexis) was one of the first punk records released after 1989. Globus, which gained primacy in publishing domestic productions, was established in 1990; J. Horník, *Karel “Kocour” Havelka*, <http://tvare-vzdoru.vaclavhavel-library.org/cs/profil/25/karel-kocour-havelka-1951> (accessed: 18.06.2021); H. Dědek, J. Vlček, M. Voráč, *Zub času*, Praha 2012, pp. 177–178; R. Diestler, *Tři sestry, Hlavně, že je večerek, aneb 15 let Tři sestry v 15ti obrazech*, Praha 2000, p. 75.

gave musicians (among other things) the freedom to decide with whom they wanted to collaborate.⁴⁴

New opportunities also opened up for musicians to perform abroad. With the fall of the Iron Curtain and the opening of the borders, Czechoslovakia became opened to the world of Western music. Bands from behind the Iron Curtain aroused the curiosity of part of Western audiences (according to some opinions, these bands even represented an exotic commodity),⁴⁵ so some musicians sought to give concerts outside of Czechoslovakia (for example, Už jsme doma, Garáž, and Psí vojáci).

Garáž became a famous band in 1989, 1990. And we played in Central Park, for example, or at Midem.⁴⁶

We could go abroad, so we immediately took advantage of the opportunity. First, we went to Germany, which is the nearest, of course. And quite soon, in 1992, we went to America for the first time.⁴⁷

However, as the memories of musicians and the recollection of some music publicists reveal, these were often “underground” concerts that took place in small, narrow spaces and only for a few people.⁴⁸ In this sense, only a few Czech bands managed to establish a career abroad. One example was the band Už jsme doma, which had a breakthrough in the United States of America.⁴⁹ However, this was not easily attainable. It involved regularly performing in music clubs across the United States, often in very tough conditions at the expense of personal comfort, and it took several years for the tours to become profitable.

Especially at the beginning, it was really very “Spartan” conditions. However, these concerts got better and better, and actually, as we had already performed approximately two hundred concerts there, then, I do not know, three hundred people started coming to San Francisco and so on, and it started to be a little profitable. Then we sold some merch, such as CDs, LPs, and T-shirts, so we made some money from that.⁵⁰

44 S.P. Ramet, *Rock Music in Czechoslovakia*, p. 68.

45 Š. Málek, *Punk. Každý ti odpoví jinak*, in: Vladimír 518, *Kmeny 90: městské subkultury a nezávislé společenské proudy v letech 1989–2000*, Praha 2016, p. 217.

46 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_08, Interview with I. P., recorded by Lucie Marková, Prague, 24.05.2022.

47 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_09, Interview with M. W., recorded by Lucie Marková, Jakub, 13.06.2022.

48 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_01, Interview with P. K., recorded by Lucie Marková, Prague, 04.01.2022. See also: I. Pospíšil, *Příliš pozdě zemřít mladý*, Praha 2015, p. 225. In some cases, these were also concerts for Czech emigrants, not for a domestic audience.

49 Už jsme doma, ceskatelevize.cz/specialy/bigbit/kapely/2617-uz-jsme-doma/ (accessed: 28.06.2022).

50 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_09, Interview with M. W., recorded by Lucie Marková, Jakub, 13.06.2022.

In addition to musicians, the opening of the borders also offered new opportunities for rock music fans, who also went abroad to see their idols. Some foreign music stars also came to Czechoslovakia. The Rolling Stones' performance in August 1990 at Prague's Strahov Stadium is especially iconic in this respect.⁵¹ This concert became a symbol of freedom, and for many people it was the final confirmation of the fall of the communist regime. It was promoted with the slogan: “The Stones are rolling in, Russian tanks out.”⁵²

Finally, the opening of the borders made the flow of new musical genres and trends into Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic more efficient. These genres were, for example, hip hop, grunge, hardcore, street rock, but also ska or techno. Their import caused the formation of new bands, and the young generation was especially interested in them. For example, the street rock band Alice⁵³ or the hip-hop bands Peneři strýčka Homeboye (PŠH)⁵⁴ and Chaozz were significant.⁵⁵

Euphoria and anarchy

The beginning of the 1990s was actively experienced by the narrators. Their narratives reveal several identical patterns of recollection, which primarily reflect the changes described above. As the memories of most of the narrators demonstrate, the earliest post-communist years were a very euphoric time within the alternative rock scene. A general enthusiasm for the fall of the communist regime, which had opened the floodgates and allowed musicians to concert freely, especially prevailed. “The offer was so huge that one night you could go to ten somehow smaller concerts, like the alternative scene, the independent scene, and so on.”⁵⁶

In this respect, they mainly reflected the steep increase in the number of concerts, which many people attended thanks to the absence of the fear of subsequent repressions and to make up for what had been denied to them before 1989. According to some music club managers, attendance was sometimes so high that the capacity of the clubs was exceeded severalfold.

51 For more information on the Prague concert of the Rolling Stones see: J. Blüml, *Reception of the Rolling Stones in Communist Czechoslovakia*, “Rock Music Studies,” Vol. 2 (2015), pp. 257–279.

52 *Tanky se valí ven, kameny se valí sem. Před 30 lety zahráli v Praze Rolling Stones*, <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/kultura/3164097-tanky-se-vali-ven-kameny-se-vali-sem-pred-30-lety-zahráli-v-praze-rolling-stones> (accessed: 03.05.2022). Besides the Rolling Stones, Joe Cocker, for example, also performed in Czechoslovakia in the early 1990s; ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_03, Interview with L. S., recorded by Lucie Marková, Prague, 01.02.2022.

53 R. Diestler, *Marshally nadoraz. Historie bigbeatu v západních Čechách*, Plzeň 2019, pp. 97–98.

54 B. Maderová, Z. Jurková, K. Veselý, *Dotknout se světa. Česká hudební alternativa 1968–2013*, Praha 2013, p. 100.

55 D. Radovanovič, *Svobodná a divoká 90. léta. Příběhy z doby, kdy bylo možné vše*, Praha 2017, p. 91.

56 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_01, Interview with P. K., recorded by Lucie Marková, Prague, 04.01.2022.

S.F.: When I was working on the project of the club, it was approved for 120 people, with the understanding that with some rare cases there could be maybe two hundred people. However, there were, for example, about 800 people.⁵⁷

Considering the fact that punk was interesting mainly for young people, this was probably related especially to the young generation. According to the musicians, this period was also completely boundless or, as some of them referred to it, an “anarchist one.”⁵⁸

In this respect the atmosphere was like really completely... inside out, it was completely turn, maybe even without limits.⁵⁹

After 1989 or in 1990, it broke completely; it was anarchy, no one knew anything, and laws did not exist or existed, but everyone was afraid to interfere in some way, so one could really do almost anything and the quickly gained freedom was very nice. It is a very good feeling of euphoria.⁶⁰

As can be seen in the second statement, the term “anarchy” pointed both to the absence of laws and regulations (both in general and in the music scene specifically) and to the negligence of the relevant authorities to enforce the outdated but still current legislation. This may have been related to the fear of banning or censoring anything, as one musician has pointed out.⁶¹ Therefore, musicians as well as concert promoters tested the limits of what was already allowed.

We held a concert to support *Lidové noviny*, and we did it without asking for a permit. And since no one wanted to change the regulations, the laws, and so on, we said: “Well, we will just hold the concert without permission, and we will see what happens.” If it’s a scandal, we’ll deal with it then. Fortunately, there was no scandal, and I think they cancelled the permit procedure on the day this concert took place.⁶²

57 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_06, Interview with A. B. and S. F., recorded by Lucie Marková, Prague, 07.04.2022.

58 For more information, see: L. Marková, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

59 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_09, Interview with M. W., recorded by Lucie Marková, Jakub, 13.06.2022.

60 Author’s private archive, Interview with M. C., recorded by Lucie Marková, Pilsen, 13.02.2018. Cited by L. Marková, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

61 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_09, Interview with M. W., recorded by Lucie Marková, Jakub, 13.06.2022.

62 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_03, Interview with L. S., recorded by Lucie Marková, Prague, 01.02.2022.

S.F.: There was no better time than the 1990s for us. Freer times. Unlike any times before or since.
 A.B.: There were no laws yet – none had been made for the situation – but people were determined to do something at that moment, so as society was transformed on the fly, a lot of things were simply allowed until someone forbade them.⁶³

The memories of the concert promoters also point to the “deviation” of the first “post-communist” months, when everything was changing on the spot and the period was very “unrestrained.” Their narratives related to the alternative rock music scene thus fit into the widely used image of the 1990s as a “wild” era for the Czech Republic.⁶⁴

However, the “euphoric” recollection of the early 1990s by some musicians and other members of the alternative rock scene may have been influenced not only by the general feeling of freedom but also by other circumstances. For example, in some cases their memories could idealise the carefree time of their youth (some of them were between twenty and thirty years old in the early 1990s).⁶⁵ One of the narrators even wondered as he was recollecting if his euphoric memory of the 1990s was influenced by the fact of remembering his youth. However, in his opinion, this factor had not influenced his recollection of the era:

Everything was possible, absolutely everything. [...] Those were the best years. And it was not because I was twenty. Whenever I am thinking back, I ask myself a hundred times whether it was not affected by how young my life was. No, no. If it happened now, I would be just as happy.⁶⁶

In this case, the idealisation of the early 1990s could be related to the idea mentioned by the Czech rapper Vladimír 518 in his book on Czech subcultures in the 1990s. According to him, it was a unique era that no one had experienced until then and that will probably not be repeated.⁶⁷ Moreover, we must also consider the

63 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_06, Interview with A. B. and S. F., recorded by Lucie Marková, Prague, 07.04.2022.

64 V. Pehe, *The Entrepreneur in “Transformation Cinema”: Representing the Economic Changes of the 1990s in Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia*, “East European Politics and Societies and Cultures,” Vol. 36 (2/2022), p. 455. In connection with the 1990s, the phrase “Whoever remembers them, did not live through them” is also used in the Czech Republic.

65 Euphoric narratives were also evident among members of the same generation of university students in 1989. For more information, see: V. Pehe, *Zlatá devadesátá?* in: M. Vaněk (ed.), *Sto studentských evolucí. Vysokoškolští studenti roku 1989. Životopisná vyprávění v časoběrné perspektivě*, Praha 2019, p. 186. Cited by L. Marková, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

66 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_05, Interview with R. T., recorded by Lucie Marková, Zoom, 10.03.2022.

67 Vladimír 518 (ed.), *Kmeny 90: městské subkultury a nezávislé společenské proudy v letech 1989–2000*, Praha 2016, p. 11. Cited by L. Marková, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

context of the time in which the narrators remember the early 1990s. Their sense of general euphoria and unlimited freedom may be exaggerated by the current situation in the music environment, since they feel that the bureaucracy is again growing and becoming increasingly restrictive. And in the case of interviews recorded in 2022, it could be also related to the experience of the time of COVID-19 lockdowns and quarantines.⁶⁸

However, as the oral history interviews (particularly with West Bohemian musicians) have shown, the narratives about the 1990s are not the same throughout the period. The euphoric remembering is typical only for the first half of the decade. The second half of the decade is characterised by a sobering up from this initial euphoria.

The times are changing

According to the West Bohemian musicians, the experience of the 1990s as a “time of unlimited possibilities” began to change around the middle of the decade. At that time, they began to sense the dwindling of their fans and a declining interest in live rock productions:⁶⁹ “The times had changed. They would no longer invite you (to perform) like before, when they would almost fight for you. It was different.”⁷⁰

There are several reasons for the smaller interest in rock music and rock concerts. The first, external cause is the fact that the market and thus the fans had become oversaturated with this kind of music. Due to the changing priorities of the music industry, which began to focus on alternative rock music in the early 1990s, there was enough of this music everywhere, and supply soon began to exceed demand. Since rock music was commonly available on records, it was no longer necessary to go to concerts regularly. Moreover, music from abroad was constantly flowing into the Czech Republic, including the already mentioned new musical trends, which started to become especially popular among the younger generation.⁷¹

In contrast, the fans of punk bands, the narrators came from, went through personality development and began to settle down and build their “homes” during the 1990s.⁷² According to the musicians, after trying out the new possibilities of the

68 For more information on the influence of the time when a story is told, see: A. Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, New York 1991, pp. 51–80. In the time of COVID-19 lockdowns and quarantines, the concerts had to be cancelled and could not be organised for some time. After the relaxation of some of regulations, there were, for example, some limits on the size of audiences.

69 For more information, see: L. Marková, *op. cit.*, pp. 114–123.

70 Author’s private archive, Interview with R. F., recorded by Lucie Marková, Pilsen, 22.06.2018.

71 S.P. Ramet, V. Đorđević, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

72 For more information see: L. Marková, *op. cit.*, pp. 114–123.

new era, their fans began to focus on their private lives. They focused on their careers, started families, and had less free time.

The fact that the experience of the 1990s within the alternative rock music scene as a euphoric time began to change was also sensed by its other members. Unlike the West Bohemian musicians, however, they noticed this trend a little earlier:

I would say that the first such significant decline, if we can call it that, took place in, let's say, in 1992 [...] music magazines and records were not sold as much as they used to. But I think there was still a big interest in concerts. And around, I guess, 1992 it began to be evident for the first time that even some established bands were no longer sure to sell out concerts.⁷³

According to the managers of music clubs, the bands *Garáž*, *Už jsme doma*, *Psí vojáci*, but also *Vladimír Mišík & ETC* were among established bands.⁷⁴

The statement made by one of the music managers and concert promoters working at the Junior club *Na Chmelnici* before 1989, who pointed to a trend contrary to the narrator cited above and some other musicians, according to whom interest in Czech (Czechoslovak) forbidden culture rose after the fall of the communist regime, is remarkable in this respect:

The fact that people stopped going to concerts was more noticeable in the early 1990s. People went to the concerts of foreign bands a lot because they had never seen them before, but the Czech theatres and the Czech bands and musicians did not do very well; in fact, attendance after 1990 went down a lot. Well, I think, it recovered around 1995; some bands naturally ceased to exist, and in the middle of the 1990s people went to the concerts of those that continued to work, so the concerts carried on as normal.⁷⁵

The narrator could perceive the situation in this way because, for example, he had been involved in organising concerts not only by Czech bands but also by foreign bands from the early 1990s (including the iconic concert of the Rolling Stones), and he therefore had a point of reference. At the same time, however, his statement may relate more to the “official” (mainstream) music scene, which receded into the background in the early 1990s in favour of the alternative scene. After some time, however, this scene has slowly returned to the mainstream, where it has remained until the present.

73 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_01, Interview with P. K., recorded by Lucie Marková, Prague, 04.01.2022.

74 See, for example, ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_06, Interview with A. B. and S. F., recorded by Lucie Marková, Prague, 07.04.2022.; ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_04, Interview with L. D., recorded by Lucie Marková, Prague, 22.02.2022.

75 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_03, Interview with L. S., recorded by Lucie Marková, Prague, 01.02.2022.

However, another narrator, the manager of a music club in West Bohemia, dates the change in the experience of the 1990s to not until the end of the decade, to 2000. He evaluated this especially in the context of the club's dramaturgy since, in his opinion, it was necessary to include more recorded music into the club's program and to organise more concerts for mainstream bands to the detriment of the alternative music bands, which were no longer profitable.

A lot of people said: "And why are you not playing Alanis Morissette? And I like Alanis Morissette, for example."

"And why are you not playing it after the concert and why do you still organise the big beat's concerts?"

So, I made a compromise.⁷⁶

However, the fact that the narrator saw this change in 1999–2000 may have been because he opened the club in 1994 and some trends might therefore have become evident a little later. At the same time, the decline in visitors to music clubs may have been related to the economic situation in the Czech Republic as well. Between 1997 and 1999, the Czech economy was in recession, which manifested itself (among other things) in people lowering their expenses,⁷⁷ as some other music club managers have also pointed out.⁷⁸

Musicians could perceive this "sobering" effect after the initial euphoria of the 1990s not only in relation to the interest of fans but also in the issues that arose within this scene, where the generational challenge (similar to their fans) began to appear.

Then it started to get a little worse again, so for example some people in the band had more work. We were also getting older; we were about thirty years old, or maybe we were not getting older, but it was starting to be a little different. Then we also had other worries, many of us had children and jobs, and we also started to cool off from the euphoria of the 1990s, from the original 1990s.⁷⁹

76 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_05, Interview with R. T., recorded by Lucie Marková, Zoom, 10.03.2022.

77 L. Žídek, *Transformace české ekonomiky 1989–2004*, Praha 2006, pp. 81–85.

78 See, for example: R. Diestler, M. Kukla, *Znojmo, Břeclav, Mikulov... & kluby*, "Rock&Pop," Vol. 10 (7/1999), pp. 24–25; R. Diestler, M. Kukla, *Brno... & kluby*, "Rock&Pop," Vol. 10 (9/1999), p. 24.

79 Author's private archive, Interview with R. F., recorded by Lucie Marková, Pilsen, 22.06.2018.

Some musicians wanted to focus on things other than music and, as with their fans, to focus on their private lives. The decline of enthusiasm and the desire of some musicians to direct their ambitions into other “ways” could also result in a band’s breaking up.⁸⁰

According to some musicians as well as club managers, besides the enthusiasm, the original values that were typical for the alternative rock scene not only before 1989, but also in the first post-socialist years, began to disappear. The cohesion between the alternative groups, which were held together by a common enemy represented by the communist regime and was manifested, for example, in friendly relationships between the concert promoters and bands during the organisation of music production in the early 1990s, was disintegrating.⁸¹ Moreover, a new generation of bands appeared on the scene, one that did not have direct experience with the pre-1989 period, so the friendship was disappearing from the relations between organisers and bands. According to some narrators, time began to “normalise” and stabilise after the initial “deviation.”⁸²

The alternative rock music scene, including punk bands, also began to stratify. Some bands became “professional” and turned their subcultural capital⁸³ into economic capital, taking advantage of their acquired positions in the mainstream and making a living from music. They performed (and still perform) on large stages at large festivals. Some of them returned to clubs after the short “excursion” into the “big world” of music (for example, *Psí vojáci*).⁸⁴ Some of them remained in the alternative scene, which could be characterised as a club scene, away from the commercial scene.⁸⁵ They still performed (and some of them still perform) in

80 Disagreements were evident, for example, among the members of the band *Garáž*. As a result of this, the founder of the band was kicked out in 1993. He kept the original name of the band and continued to perform with new musicians for some time. The rest of the members of *Garáž* established a new band called *Garage* and Tony Ducháček, which are still playing to this day. See, for example: ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_08, Interview with I. P., recorded by Lucie Marková, Prague, 24.05.2022; I. Pospíšil, *Přiliš pozdě zemřít mladý*, Praha 2015.

81 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_05, Interview with R. T., recorded by Lucie Marková, Zoom, 10.03.2022.

82 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_02, Interview with F. V., recorded by Lucie Marková, Zoom, 21.01.2022.

83 The way in which they expressed their affiliation with the subculture (for example, language or dress style, dedication to and knowledge of the subculture). On subculture capital, see: R. Moore, *Alternative to What? Subcultural Capital and the Commercialization of a Music Scene*, “Deviant Behavior,” Vol. 26 (3/2005), pp. 231–235.

84 O. Bezr, *Psí vojáci mezi undergroundovými a mainstreamovými hity*, https://www.lidovky.cz/orientace/kultura/psi-vojaci-mezi-undergroundovymi-a-mainstreamovymi-hity.A211229_125051_ln_kultura_bezr (accessed: 09.09.2022).

85 M. Michela, J. Lomíček, K. Šima, *Dělej něco! České a slovenské fanziny a budování alternativních scén*, Praha 2021, p. 74.

music clubs and released records mostly at their own expense or on small independent labels (for example, the band Znouzectnost).⁸⁶

Well, it depended: some of the bands stayed, in terms of playing and way of performing, as before 1989, which means they played a few times a year. And some bands started to play at higher levels. Almost everyone released some albums, CDs; legally, not illegally on tapes like it was before.⁸⁷

According to West Bohemian musicians, the gap between the commercial and the fringe scenes widened even more.⁸⁸ However, as one of the music publicists has pointed out, this was a natural progression.

L.M.: What has commercialisation done to the values of that formerly non-commercial scene?

P.K.: Well, that is hard to answer because with each of those performers, the opportunity to take advantage of those looser boundaries did different things. Some had used this suddenly acquired “greater” fame, if I say it in this sublime way, to change their music and to go in a more superficial direction; this is only logical. There have always been cases such as this, and there always will be, so the fact that an originally independent band soon became very, very commercial and favoured by the media is normal.⁸⁹

Interpretative risks and other possible research directions: In lieu of a conclusion

As we can see from the memories especially of punk musicians and other members of the alternative rock music scene, the 1990s within the alternative rock music scene was characterised by two “levels” represented by two narratives. The “euphoric” narrative, typical for the early 1990s, gradually changes to a narrative that could be characterised as “sobering up,” with the temporal boundaries

86 The punk band *Tři sestry*, for example, became a very successful commercial band in the Czech environment. This was in contrast to hardcore bands that remained part of the non-commercial scene in the Czech Republic, for example the band *Radegast*; ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_01, Interview with P. K., recorded by Lucie Marková, Prague, 04.01.2022. About the band *Tři sestry* see: R. Diestler, *Tři sestry, Hlavně, že je večírek, aneb 15 let Tří sester v 15ti obrazech*, Praha 2000. Furthermore, J. Almer, “*The Wild Underground Extreme of Human Rights and Ecological Activities: Czechoslovak, Czech and Slovenian Hardcore Punk Fanzine Cultures from the 1980s to the Present*,” *Forum Historiae*, Vol. 14 (1/2020), p. 74. For more information about the band *Znouzectnost* see, for example: R. Diestler, *op. cit.*, pp. 89–91.

87 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_03, Interview with L. S., recorded by Lucie Marková, Prague, 01.02.2022.

88 L. Marková, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

89 ÚSD, COH, sig. ALT_01, Interview with P. K., recorded by Lucie Marková, Prague, 04.01.2022.

of these two narratives varying from narrator to narrator. However, such a perception of the 1990s is not unique or typical only for the milieu of the alternative music scene. The “awakening” from the initial enthusiasm and freedom is also evident in other social groups, although its causes are different from those in the case of musicians.⁹⁰

Considering the relatively large scope of the alternative rock music scene, however, these narratives are restricted only to a small group of musicians and other members of the alternative rock scene (in this case, music club managers, concert promoters, a music manager, and a music publicist). To make the conclusions more generalisable to the whole alternative rock music scene, it is necessary to carry out further oral history research involving other genres of the alternative rock music scene and other regions in which rock music settled down. The inclusion of all regions will also provide an opportunity to capture regional specifics, including the possibility of comparison between the regions where alternative rock music had a strong tradition (apart from West Bohemian and Prague, relatively well-developed music scenes could be found, for example, in Northern Moravia) and regions where alternative music was not overly developed (for example, Eastern Bohemia).

In addition to regional specifics, new perspectives can also be opened up, such as for example, in connection with the aforementioned stratification of the alternative rock scene, especially the question of how the musicians themselves perceived the transition made by some of their colleagues to the “other side” – into the mainstream – and, conversely, how mainstream bands perceived those who remained part of the non-commercial scene. Similar questions could be asked regarding the circle of fans, who also sensitively perceived the border between the mainstream and the alternative.

Finally, there is an opportunity for an international comparison as well, especially in the context of other post-socialist countries. Therefore, in this respect, the conclusions of this article could be considered as a pilot research project that will be further developed and will include new topics.

90 V. Pehe, *Zlatá devadesátá?*, pp. 190, 200–203.



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Summary

The fall of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia in November 1989 brought about a general relaxation of restrictions and new conditions throughout society. Changes were also evident in the alternative rock music scene, where activities were defined by several laws and had clear limits during the communist regime. While the functioning of the alternative scene under the communist regime is relatively well mapped, its development in the 1990s remains little researched. This article contributes to this mosaic.

By using oral history interviews with rock musicians especially from West Bohemia, but also from North Bohemia and Prague, music club managers, concert promoters, a music manager, and a music publicist, this paper attempts to describe what they thought the 1990s were like within the alternative rock scene and how they remember this period. The author outlines two narratives that arise from the interviews – the “euphoric” one, which is typical for the early 1990s, and the narrative of “sobering up,” which is characteristic for the following years – and analyses why the narrators remembered the 1990s in these ways. She argues that there are several causes, for example, the period of remembering, the age of the narrators in the 1990s, and the generally experienced feeling of euphoria and freedom in the first post-communist months.