



# Bob Dylan comes to Vladimir Merta's Town

by Patrick Wright

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On a foggy night, Prague's House of Culture could easily be mistaken for the South Bank Centre in London – a concrete labyrinth with a profusion of signs hiding the one direction you need. The seats, however, are in a class of their own: vast, plush boat-like things that would halve the capacity of any British theatre. The auditorium was used for party conventions during the communist years, and it was plainly considered desirable to keep even the grossest of apparatchiks floating in ample comfort.

Earlier this month, however, the House of Culture was occupied by smiling, denim-clad veterans of the old cultural opposition who had come to see their hero Bob Dylan. And there he was suddenly, fighting off the flu, as he opened his new European tour – or, if the myth is to be believed, the latest stretch of a tour that has been running more or less continuously for over a decade.

For all his legendary status, Dylan remains a strikingly unassimilated figure. His only visible concession to showmanship is a silky shirt of dubious cut, and perhaps the two vaguely matching hats of the guitarists flanking him. His movements are the antic opposite of any choreographed routine. He stoops, shuffles, and leans to the point of falling. He sits down for a moment or bends in order to honk into a harmonica, while his free arm floats up, stiff and scarecrow-like, to throw a handful of disconnected fingers into the air.

And then there are the songs, which have poured out in such mixed profusion for more than 30 years, and which vastly extended the reach of popular music in the sixties. Extraordinary and challenging things at they best, they have been converted into the home truths of a generation that remains nostalgic for the idealism of its youth even if it has long since come to terms with the business suit and the golf course too.

It is not just in Prague that the alumni includes presidents as well as the mathematicians and carpenters' wives that Dylan himself once sang about.



Others move on, but Dylan still carries the radiant burden of his songs around the world. Avoiding interviews, biographical enquirers and tiresomely obsessed fans, he insists repeatedly that the songs are the only story, and that he can do nothing more worthwhile than perform than live. He has described himself as no more than the postman who delivers the letter, and he sometimes seems strangely oblivious to both his audience and his influence.

A good Dylan performance resembles a life and death struggle between this slight 53-year-old man and the epic contents of his postbag. Sometimes he appears as the exhausted slave of his own timeless inventions – striking back at them, grinding through them with the roughness of a teenage garage band, or barking them out as if his only purpose was to kill them stone dead. Sometimes those old songs must hang over him like a curse. No wonder he tears into them, then raises new melodies and rhythms from their ruins – sometimes very strong ones, which enable him to fly off in unanticipated directions.

At other moments, and there were enough of these in the Prague concert to augur well for the forthcoming British dates, the singer and the song come together more harmoniously, and then even the most familiar of those old songs suddenly have their moment of originality all over again. The Prague concert includes a compelling performance of *The Man in The Long Black Coat*. As for the acoustic rendition of *Mr Tambourine Man*, Dylan started out teetering mortally between guitarist and double bass, but he was soon picked up by the song and whipped back into shape.

Dylan seems to feel some affinity for the still recently liberated city of Prague. His first concert here, a year or so ago, is remembered as one of his best for years, and the audience earlier this month was enormously appreciative too. This is a city where the idea of freedom still seems romantically connected to the memory of the sixties. The street markets are full of tie-dye T-shirts. A cinema announces *Easy Rider* as a premier, and a nearby gallery has an exhibition of Dennis Hopper's photographs from the sixties. A ghost-band that masquerades as *The Doors* is billed as coming soon.

But there is another reason why Dylan finds such a war response here. For years after the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968, Dylan was one of the distant heroes who turned folk music into a bastion of opposition to communist rule.



The Czech musicians who registered his influence include Iva Bittova, a celebrated experimental violinist, and Dagmar Andrtova, a guitarist who completely redefined the instrument during the years she was obliged to spend sweeping the streets of Prague. The singer-songwriters include Vladimir Misig, who has now returned to rock music after serving as an MP in the wake of the Velvet Revolution, and Jaroslav Hutka, who turned Moravian folksong into a heartfelt indictment of the regime that soon forced him into rootless exile. But the title of 'King of Czech folk music' is reserved for Vladimir Merta, who never gave the secret police the satisfaction of his own emigration.

Merta joined me for the Dylan concert, and was greeted by so many people in the auditorium that, even though he would not countenance the idea, it seemed as if this genial man had actually lent Dylan his audience. He and the other opposition singers played the role that Dylan rejected when he refused to become the political mouthpiece of the anti-Vietnam war movement in the sixties. In the west, Dylan's use of electricity put him at a distance from the purists of acoustic protest song, for whom the plugged-in 'folk rock' Dylan introduced at the 1965 Newport festival was nothing but a despicable sell-out. And he further outraged those who would have turned him into a spokesman of progressive forces when he issued the simple love songs of Nashville Skyline in 1969.

The singers of the Czech opposition became the oppressed conscience of their nation by force of very different experience. Yet for Merta politics was not the blunt programmatic statement favoured by Phil Ochs or Ewan MacColl (the British Communist balladeer who was among those who condemned Dylan's rise to fame). Instead it was much closer to Dylan's better lyrics – a nuanced affair, which met monolithic oppression with subtlety, variation and unashamedly literary ambiguities designed to go off inside the secret theatre of the listener's head.

Though never widely known in the West, these singers were among Dylan's sharpest followers – much inspired by a generational message that seemed to cut across the whole polarized logic of the cold war. As Merta says, 'I was influenced by Dylan even if I hadn't heard his records.' As a man of the sixties, he relied on the thought of Dylan as 'a crutch – someone helping me'. 'I always felt like a partner', he says, remembering how he used to dream of one day playing with Dylan, and laughing at the thought of this 'typically middle-European mixture of under-estimation and over-estimation'.



Entering the concert, everyone is searched for tape recorders. Dylan and Columbia have lost a lot of money to pirate recordings, but for Merta, the illicit recording has always been a *samizdat* rather than a bootleg. His version of live performance was confined to private apartments and scattered towns far from Prague, where for years he was banned from playing, but Merta's music still had terrific power in those grim years of 'normalisation'. His songs were alive with a sense of latency and transformation. They told of innocence brutalized on the road to the promised land, and conjured up deserted streets where even the hours of the old town clock try to jump down and escape the grip of programmed history. They found snakes behind every word, and threw beauty and free narrative movement in the face of the Stalinist slogans that Merta could hardly bring himself to recite. If songs can be said to strain, Merta's did so eagerly – reaching out for a land where 'nothing will have to be like this'.

Dylan may have stepped back from 'the so-called real world' but Merta was in at the beginning of Civic Forum, and it was he who performed to some half a million people from the balcony in Wenceslas Square (his chosen song was 'Words, Words, Words', which provided an allegorical warning of the unreliability of political speech). Looking back on that epochal moment, he declares himself pleased that it was not just politicians who inaugurated the new age from that balcony, and that he had been able to add 'the sorcery and magic' of song.

As for the present, it is not so easy now that those passionately desired changes are under way, says Merta with the smile of a man who knows what it is like to find himself back in the shadows. He made his first mistake when the state recording companies came to him right after the Velvet Revolution, eager to issue some recordings that would demonstrate their commitment to the new world. Merta withheld, assuming that everyone else would do the same and that the compromised state organizations would be left to collapse as all sorts of new and independent initiatives sprang up to replace them. 'A terrible mistake,' he declares wryly, since others evidently felt less restrained. While they thrived in the old connections, the planned 'independent' recording company with which Merta had aligned himself spent years collapsing acrimoniously, having absorbed endless energy and issued nothing of his work.

Thankfully, Dylan seemed to avoid his more religious and salvational songs, but he included one throwaway piece written in his defiantly anti-legendary mode. The chorus included the truly dreadful refrain: 'People disappearing



everywhere you look/ Makes you want to stop and read a book.' So much for the literature professors who stepped up a quarter of a century ago to welcome Dylan as a poet alongside Shelley and Keats. So much also for the stoned fans who avoided their lectures but were sure that, if you stared for long enough at the cover of John Wesley Harding you could find the Beatles in the bark of a pictured tree, and perhaps also King Lear with a trombone sticking out of his nose.

Merta has had his compositional difficulties in recent times too. The point, he says, is that with the Velvet Revolution, 'society made a great leap forward, and without even contemplating what was happening'. People ran around forming parties and enterprises, and worrying about new problems like commercial efficiency. The changes eroded the moral economy of the old oppositional circles, breaking up long-standing friendships and apparently also pulling the rug from underneath the tradition of critical song. Merta had never written about capitalism, and, as people got on with their lives, it became more difficult to stir 'deep feelings' with a song.

Reflecting on this, Merta says, 'Now I must agree that there are some kinds of experience that you can't elaborate in a song'. There was a more particular problem too. The general approach to song-writing had been to criticize, but it seemed 'unfair to criticise Havel and Klaus'. So no sooner had the official censorship been lifted than a certain 'self-censorship took over'. As for the songs that have been written since, they seem to offer 'no deep insight into what is happening'. But then, as Merta asks, who anywhere can claim to have a grip on this world of 'unbelievable paradoxes, where last year's terrorist is this year's Nobel Laureate', and where the virtuous stand of the oppressed seems no longer to compel?

Dylan may still be filling 3,000 seat auditoriums across Europe, but by 1991 or so the future looked bleak for the Czech heroes of oppositional song. Indeed, for a while, it seemed as if none of them could raise an audience at all. Merta, who remembers playing for two people on one occasion, concedes that the generation of '68 is being overtaken by younger people who move to a very different tune. Many of the farflung student clubs where he used to sing have been converted into discos. There is a lot of 'Techno-pop' in Prague. Yet Merta insists that talk of 'the crisis of folk' has been overstated in Prague. He describes his new songs, half-laughingly, as attempted 'essays in magical realism'. In a song entitled Czech Paradise, he reviews the preoccupations of everyday life in the new world, where everybody is busy gathering up receipts and old tickets – even to Bob



Dylan concerts – to set them against personal income tax. And when a young admirer in Jericho sent roses to decorate President Havel’s office in Prague, they too ended up in a Merta song: all mixed up with the tanks which, despite Havel’s early idealism, the Czechoslovak arms trade was desperately trying to sell into the Middle East.

Dylan’s concert seemed to close a little early. The great man had fought through his flu for a couple of encores, and more or less kept his patience with a young female admirer who invaded the stage and pushed her luck too far as the suffering hero backed off with a hard-edged version of *It Ain’t Me Babe*.

Two nights later, Vladimir Merta played for his audience in a small Prague venue. Sixty or so people showed up. ‘Much better than would have been possible two years ago’, he says, adding that ‘people are appreciating the personal message once again’.

Merta thought that Prague had been well satisfied by Dylan’s performance: no one has every come near *Blonde on Blonde*. Yet that was in 1966. Dylan’s two latest recordings suggest a new vocation: not just *Unplugged* but alone with acoustic guitar and harmonica again. Perhaps the day will come when he and Merta play together in a small folk club after all.

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