

Claire Levy

Youth and Popular Music in Bulgaria: Local versus Global

This paper is based on two perspectives crucial in many ways for the cultural developments over the last century, and especially after World War Two. The one is the process of globalization, unfamiliar in its size during previous ages, and the other is the youth culture, becoming more clearly identifiable on the global scale, at least since the mid-1950s on. In music, modern youth culture is usually related to the rock practices. Still now, however, I want to avoid any misleading conclusions and to point out something important regarding the cultural situation in Bulgaria. Without this point, the picture in Bulgaria would seem rather one-sided. Popular music in Bulgaria, both at present and in the past, is diverse and multi-faceted. And similarly, the youth in Bulgaria, both in the recent past and especially today in the postmodern discourse, is highly differentiated according to a number of indicators. One of them goes, of course, to the music preferences identifying different youth circles, and rock music does not exhaust the big variety of these preferences.

Thus, what I want to discuss here is related to only one aspect of Bulgarian youth culture identified however during a particular historical time, illustrating in a way the dialogue between global and local. I focus on the global rock impact and the specific way it has been localized in Bulgaria in the mid-1980s. In such a discussion, I find it helpful to draw on the "dialogic" approach to pop music history advocated by Keith Negus (1996). Such an approach works in favor of understanding the dynamic nature of popular music, seen as a discontinuous process, connecting the past and the future, melting fragments from "outside" and "inside," putting together global and local influences, bringing as a result distinguished directions possible to happen in just a given particular space and during a given specific time. In addition, such an approach could illuminate the issue of the cultural dialogues and interactions in music. Through such dialogues different traditions emerged and developed, and they bring – as a rule – narrowly mixed and remixed links that, over the time, would hardly remain clearly identified. Negus does not suggest searching for a moment when the cultural dialogues, the conversation, so to say, or better the cultural exchanges might have started. Instead, he argues for an approach that can identify the continuities and the dialogues through which a given tradition develops in time and space. Thus the point here is that what has been happening among rock musicians and audiences in Bulgaria is not a matter of just passive local "responses" to the global impact, but a matter of interaction in which the immediate participants in the process take inevitably dynamic position.

The global rock impact, however, is often seen by many critics as rather problematic. On one hand, rock is interpreted as a prime exponent of "cultural imperialism," as a cultural form, associated at first with American (US) culture and with the powerful commercial interests of the international music industry, and on the other – as a

liberating force constructing a sense of local difference and authenticity in different countries all over the world. According to some authors (Regev 1997), such a paradoxical contradiction is solved in making local rock music. In the process, local musicians draw eclectically from a musical "transnational culture," reflecting the global and adding their new own meaning. And all these exchanges produce, as a result, a sense of belonging to a particular community, "*reflexive community*," as some call it, whose major signifier could be seen in an appreciation of particular music values, in our case rock music values, which in a way doesn't belong anymore to only one nation or ethnic or local group. What I'd like to point out is that rock phenomenon is not anymore a homogenous music; it's rather a set of changing practices according to the specific time and place they have been happening. This explains why some rock observers stated that rock era was "*born around 1956 with Elvis Presley, peaking around 1967 with Sgt Pepper of The Beatles, and dying around 1976 with The Sex Pistols*" (Frith 1988a, 1). Such statements are based on a particular experience of rock, in this case on the logic of the western, Anglo-American rock developments only, losing perhaps their rebellious, oppositional spirit through co-opting with the big industry. But as some other observers claim "*rumors of rock death have been greatly exaggerated and many people have been communing with the spirit of rock since 1976*" because "*musical forms of rock are transformed and move on in different ways across the planet, acquiring new significance in different situations*" (Negus, 1996). According to Negus, not only has rock been lived through different generational experiences since 1976, it has also grown up and gone from its Anglo-American home out into the world. At the moment when it was dying for some citizens of Britain and the United States, for other people, rock was very much alive and used to articulate dissent, alternative sensitivity. Rock was becoming an important part of a repertoire of oppositional political practices in a number of the former socialist states of Eastern and Central Europe. As Peter Wicke states, in the former German Democratic Republic, rock was articulated to social changes that seemed a lot more "revolutionary" than what was going in the United States during the middle of the 1950's. Thus, rock has not died; it was just going "*somewhere else*" (Grossberg, 1994), and becoming a part of other musical dialogues.

I believe that during the 1980's rock music with its oppositional potential was also there in Bulgaria experiencing its "hey days." At that time it was gaining – for more and more Bulgarian youngsters – that mythological significance, in quite a similar way like, say, what was rock for the Anglo-American youth during the rebel late 1960's. Actually, the romantic, though vague idea of a revolutionary counterculture, which can "change the world," existed among Bulgarian youngsters still then in the 1960's, and even earlier, during the "cold war" paranoia years when the access to modern western culture was restricted, especially in terms of popular music coming from the US seen by authorities at that time as a "subversive" ideological tool of the capitalist "enemy." In music, this access was restricted to accidentally smuggled records or listening to western radio stations like Luxemburg, BBC, and Monte Carlo. Yet, even in a more sporadic and informal way, an original rock'n'roll became popular among Bulgarian youngsters, mainly in the urban areas, still in the mid-1950's.

Similarly, the 1960's British rock invasion penetrated Bulgaria – regardless of the hostile attitude of the cultural authorities qualifying this music as a propaganda of the “*American life-style*.” Despite this situation, many amateur rock groups, mostly of students in the cities, were created still in the early 1960's, playing repertoire mostly by Shadows, Beatles, Rolling Stones, etc. Called vocal-instrumental ensembles, these groups – even censored and regulated – introduced and raised a taste for one unpolished style and behavior, outlining youth territory in popular music. Bulgarian repertoire was highly encouraged in order to oppose the western influence. One of the most successful Bulgarian rock groups, still playing however in our days, was The Shtourtzite (The Crickets), started in 1967, in Sofia. At public venues the group performed both songs of their own and songs by professional composers, and informally, avoiding requirements of the officials, cover versions of global hot rock hits. What motivated the high interest of Bulgarian youngsters to this music was still at that time not only the fact that they loved the particular unpolished way of “having fun;” this music was felt also as a symbol of freedom, of a liberated individuality and independent stand (Levy, 1992). And I tend to believe that in this sense a parallel between East and West could be drawn. The fact that people in the West cried “*make love, not war*,” while those in the East stubbornly played on, listened to, or just enjoyed themselves to the sound of the “banned” music does not eliminate a possible parallel in the motives.

Thus the rock narrative in Bulgaria started no later than it started in the western countries, following immediately the global fad and still reflecting a different social history. This narrative revealed a growing maturity rather during the 1980's, in response to the continuous local ideological restrictions. At that time, rock in Bulgaria was already smart enough to call in a more independent and individual way for a pluralism against the lack of real human and artistic freedom.

The song I want to present as an illustration of this both human and artistic maturity is not any unique example; it was just a part of the process I am trying to outline. Named “*Rock in Past Time*” (Appendix), the piece, – produced in 1985 by Shtourtzite, – gained a status of a “classic rock hit” on the local scale, if I can put it this way. At that time, the members of the group were however around their late 30's and early 40's, not that young anymore, and the song is actually a metaphor reflecting the bitter experience of one rock generation surviving a number of not so funny sides of the specific rock narrative in Bulgaria, and more generally – in Eastern Europe as a whole. The song recalls, with humor however, not with hatred, some manifestations of the local censorship, of the time when for having long hair a male could be arrested, and for wearing a short skirt, a female could get in trouble. Which means, however, all those attributes reminding belonging to the “rock community,” threatening the ideological “health” of the society. What one can read in the lyrics is a derivation of a highly personal experience which sounds more like “*OK, we don't give a shit for the surrounding stupidities, cause finally we're still here, we still survived, but why, damn it, was all that wasting of time?*” Looking for the effect of a parody – an approach, associated with usually a really strong position which makes the social criticism implied in it to be taken seriously – the song makes sense of different dia-

logues working together in the message as a whole. Lyrically, the song is based on a boyish, everyday vocabulary, appealing to the then young audiences and reminding as well of the past times. Musically, one can hear something from the sound borrowed from the Beatles and also from the sound of the hard rock, mixed however with a clearly expressed notion of a local folk music sense of humor. Even the rhythm base, derived from the famous rhythmic configuration credited to Bo Diddley, a black American R&B artist, was transformed to sound in one more folk-like, local way, implying a healthy ability to make fun of what you don't approve. As a whole, the song talks with the language of one clearly expressed cultural identity, belonging both to the local and to the global "reflexive rock community."

In conclusion, I'd like to point out that today this specific rebel period for the rock narrative in Bulgaria is, of course, already over, along with the lifting of the Berlin wall in 1989, like, I guess, in most of the countries with similar history. I wouldn't say that rock in Bulgaria has died, but, in any case, my feeling is that times have radically changed, and new challenges appeared in front of the present youth culture.

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Appendix

Rock in Past Time

1.

I remember, we were young
when started singing rock.
And it was blanded
to be a vicious (sinful) dance.

May be cause
waltz and tango
were something goldy,
goldy but oldy.

2.

These days another fad
is sneaking –
damn it! that disco's
hot that theme, too.

Refrain:

Hey, remember, some day
everything's changing
but then the youth
comes back in the memory only.

3.

Who didn't tell off
the fashion large,
who didn't tel off
the fashion small.

All smart people
got soon
new clothes
replace old armour!

Refrain:

Hey, remember
everything's changing
but then the youth comes back
in the memory only,
harder and harder.
We know how!
Cnahge you armour
With new clothes! (3)

4.

Damn it, these kids
want new sounds,
either faddy,
either native.

Rock didn't die,
just time wa wasted,
Damn it,
We're older now!..

Refrain:

Hey, remember, some day
everything's changing
and then the youth's back
in only singing rock'n'roll. (2)

(translated from Bulgarian by C. Levy)