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By Peter Balik

ROCK'N ROLL – SOUND OF FREEDOM

He had been surprised that his countrymen didn't know about Rock'n Roll's contribution in helping to destroy the Soviet Empire. Together with his colleagues he then decided to shoot a film about *Free To Rock*. Over the weekend, producer Douglas Yeager presented the film to Slovakian audiences.



Free to Rock producer Douglas Yeager at Pohoda Festival

Balik: You probably have to have a lot knowledge of music when making a film about music. Is that the case with you?

Yeager: Initially, I planned on a career of singing and acting on Broadway, but later moved on to become a concert promoter. I promoted The Allman Brothers with Duane Allman, James Gang, Genesis, Yes, Chuck Berry, Velvet Underground, Aerosmith, Edgar Winter, Eagles, Ray Charles, Doobie Brothers, Aretha Franklin, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and many more. I had also taken American groups to Europe where I discovered Les Variations and then introduced them to the American audience. Their members came from Morocco and had created the Moroccanroll sound. They were a wild bunch of guys, and after two years of touring with them, I was totally burnt and decided to leave the music business. However, my colleagues suggested that I concentrate on folk artists. Candidly, I didn't know anything folk music, but within a year I was managing Richie Havens (from Woodstock), Odetta, Tom Paxton, and Josh White. They wrote and performed songs of social conscience with a political dimension that matched my social and political activism.

Balik: Keith Richards once said that blue jeans and rock'n roll destroyed the Communist regime. You probably agree with him, do you not?

Yeager: He's right, but when we started filming *Free To Rock* in 2005, only a few people knew about this topic in America. When I told the average person that I was filming a documentary about how rock'n roll contributed to the destruction of the Soviet empire, they thought I was mad. They didn't understand. That is, except for some people who studied Soviet communism or knew the power of music. The rest of the people had no idea what it meant to grow up in a totalitarian state where the government controlled your thoughts and your activities. The young Russians had no choice at that time. They had to listen to classical music or army choirs, and then suddenly, Chuck Berry's electric guitar appeared in the short wave radio. Every musician I've interviewed, whether they were from Czechoslovakia, East Germany, or in Lithuania, said they did not know what the sound was or understand the lyrics of the song, but they know it was the sound of freedom.

Balik: One Russian musician told that the Internet is for them what rock'n roll had been before -- a window to freedom.

Yeager: Yes, that's a good analogy today.

Yeager: When were your parents born?

Balik: 1948 and 1951

Yeager: So they were born under communism, and they had to know the feeling of how the music helped liberate them. Certainly it helped them to become interested in Western culture. Do you know the term 'soft power'? When using 'hard power' in dealing with an opposing force, a country can threaten with the military. But with soft power you

attract the opposing people with your culture, and in time, they will turn away from their government propaganda. I spent several hours with former KGB Chief of Foreign Counter Intelligence, General Oleg Kalugin, now a professor near Washington, D.C. At the end of the film, you hear General Kalugin saying that the ideological and cultural weapons from the West were more effective in causing the collapse of the Soviet Union than the military with all its tanks and missiles. Rock'n roll was a virus that could not be stopped. It caused the young people to cease believing in the communist system and they began to look towards the West and their culture.

Balik: As a matter of fact, Richards' words are confirmed.

Yeager: Yes, all rockers from the Eastern bloc who we interviewed believe rock'n roll was a major force in causing the collapse of the Soviet empire. But how do we get others from the Western world to realize this? I hope our film will help. We interviewed a fascinating guy from Riga, who unfortunately is not in the movie because the sound equipment malfunctioned. He had been the biggest bootlegger of American rock records in the Soviet Union. During Communism, he was one of the wealthiest people in the USSR, until he was arrested and tortured nearly to death. The KGB hung him from the ceiling with his hands tied to his feet, and for the next 24 hours they beat him with wooden bats. But he survived. We sat with him at his studio, as he held up a Fats Domino record in his hands. He said, "The regime claimed that everything American was evil, and we believed it...until the moment we heard the beautiful recordings of Fats Domino singing." We then realized, "How can this beautiful music be from the devil?" "And if the Kremlin is wrong about this music, then they've been lying to us about everything else coming from America?"

Balik: How did you come about to make this film?

Yeager: An old friend from my university days in France, Nick Binkley, who I hadn't seen in more than thirty years, brought me to the theme. We were having dinner in New York one night, and he began to talk to me about his ex-Soviet rockers friends who told him that rock and roll was the main reason why the Communist system fell in the Soviet Union. I had studied Soviet history, had worked in the USSR, and I knew the Power of Music. I knew this story had great potential if we could prove it to academics. Two weeks later, we sat in the plane on the way to Riga to start filming interviews. During Communism, the Soviet radio jamming stations weren't effective in the Baltic States, as those countries lay on the Baltic Sea, right across from Scandinavia. This means that the teenagers in Riga heard rock'n roll almost ten years before the kids in Moscow. Our very first interview was with Pete Anderson. This is the guy from the film who the KGB beat in the park and then threatened his family just because he was singing Ricky Nelson's songs. Do you understand what that means? He wasn't singing protest songs, just sweet songs about teenage love. We immediately understood that if Kremlin was so afraid of this young guy who was singing innocent love songs that they would threaten to kill his family, that we had the beginnings of a powerful story and film.

Balik: In the film you show mostly musicians from the former Soviet Union. There is also Vrátislave Brabeneč of the Plastic People of the Universe, but there are no musicians from Poland, former Yugoslavia or Hungary. Why did they not get into the movie?

We have a former Hungarian Ambassador in the USA Andras Simonyi, who was playing guitar at a young age in the famous Hungarian group Locomotive GT. He eventually became a politician, but never stopped playing his guitar. He told us that when he attended international conferences, the best way to establish communication with the other diplomats was to find those people who liked rock'n roll. When we interviewed him as ambassador, he had already formed a rock band in Washington with other government officials. And, we did try to get film footage from other countries, but we weren't always successful. In addition, Americans do not like to read subtitles, so we had to choose those interview subjects who spoke perfect English. I'm now writing a book on the film's thesis, and many people we interviewed who aren't in the film, such as the famous Czech illustrator and writer Peter Sís, who had been the first rock disc jockey in Czechoslovakia, will be featured in the book.

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