

# PLUS 7 DNi

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## **Long-Haired Anti-Regime People: Was Rock'n Roll Behind the Fall of the Berlin Wall?**

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### **The Americans made a film about how Rock & Roll contributed to the fall of the Berlin Wall**

"We were waiting for tanks or clouds of atomic smoke, then Rock & Roll came," says singer Billy Joel. The Cold War was "playing" mainly in the field of ideology and culture. Without this music of freedom it would have lasted ten or twenty years longer.

One night, thirteen years ago, American film producer Doug Yeager had dinner in New York with a longtime friend, Nick Binkley, and by the end of the night, they decided to map out how much music, and especially "disobedient" rock music, contributed to the end of the political divisions of the world between the East and the West.

### **The first Soviet rockers who came to America were Jews. . . .**

"How did you ever think about making a film about the role of rock music in socialism," we asked the American producer, who stopped in Bratislava this summer to promote his film. He began to describe the encounter with his old friend - from their international relations studies in France, to their common enthusiasm for performing popular music, and how Binkley helped him book his first tour of American rock bands in France in 1967. At their dinner, Binkley related, "In the mid-1970s, the US and the Soviet Union negotiated a deal that allowed Soviet Jews to immigrate to Israel. Well, every rocker who wasn't Jewish dreamed of marrying a Jewish girl as a means to get out of the USSR. But, instead of going to Israel, they all ended up in San Francisco," he recalls, while laughing at what his friend had told him. "And believe it or not, all of those Soviet rockers believed that Rock & Roll was the main cause for the collapse of the Soviet Union!" Yeager leaned forward, "That was the moment and the inspiration that started us to make the movie!"

Yeager has the magic of a magician. So the argument and story that his friend surprised him with did not seem to be so crazy. Yeager then went on to research the subject. He read about 50 books and hundreds of articles, and talked to hundreds of people who had something to say on the subject. The more he researched the history and music in Russia, Czechoslovakia, or the Baltic countries, the more he was convinced that Rock & Roll was properly involved in the events that led to the end of the Cold War. When Yeager sees our skeptical faces and listens to our questions, he draws convincing arguments that he has collected from ten years of filming and producing the documentary FREE TO ROCK.



American producer Doug Yeager: He made a film about the political role of rock & roll.  
Photo by David Duducz

### **Prohibitions and Battles . . . .**

It took more than ten years before the author of the film succeeded in acquiring the testimonies of past musicians, as well as critics, musicologists, and even the views of American ex-president Jimmy Carter and the creator of Perestroika, Mikhail Gorbachev. The film is not based from a book, so the creators needed these personalities to get in front of the camera and make their cases, and it was always a long and arduous task to secure interviews with famous personalities.

The filmmakers first visited Latvia. Rock & Roll first came to Riga almost ten years before it reached Moscow, because the Soviet radio jamming stations couldn't block the transmissions from Scandinavia to Riga. Yeager reports, "The first person we interviewed was Pete Anderson. The KGB beat him almost to death. He told us about his twelve arrests by the KGB. As they tortured him, they threatened to kill his family if he did not stop playing rock music! And Pete sang only innocent lyrics, no protest songs. They were songs made up by young boys

when they wanted to express their love for a girl.... when they just didn't know how to talk to them," he explains. "He was like Justin Bieber today!" The comparison makes Yeager laugh. "What was the problem?" he states. "Well, a young Pete Anderson sang in English, and the style of music he performed touched his rebellious soul with a sound from the 'Free World'."

"It was clear that rock was not the only force that had shaken the communist regime, but I was convinced it was one of the important elements," Yeager noted. "Carter, Gorbachev, even the NATO Deputy Secretary General and the KGB General KGB, recognized it," says Yeager.

"When you have an enemy, you can defeat it in two ways....militarily, or you can oppose it with ideologically and culturally means. The second way is more efficient, and that is precisely what happened to the Soviet Union," says KGB General Oleg Kalugin. His testimony at the end of the film, is considered by Yeager to be a powerful confirmation of the thesis they set out to prove when beginning the film project.

### **Elvis, blue jeans and chewing gum. . . .**

Yeager found joy with working on the film because of his life-long interests in European History, International Affairs, and the power of music and culture to change societies. The fact that the film was based on Rock & Roll and interviews from people in Central and Eastern Europe who were inspired by America and its culture, was fascinating to him. "To the youth behind the Iron Curtain, America was blue jeans, chewing gum and Elvis," the elements he notes were dominant over the Soviet regime and its culture. A lot of attention is paid to the music in the film. The producer says that the power and influence was in the electric guitars and the rhythm of the drums – the sounds of Rock & Roll and later rock music. The Russians, Lithuanians, Czechs and Slovaks did not know what the American rockers were singing in English, but they told us, "We just knew that it was the Sound of Freedom."

The devastating sounds of the electric guitar, the drums and the wild dancing were definitely a very different cup of coffee from the Russian classical music, folk songs, and the Red Army Choir they had been force-fed their entire lives. Rock & Roll was also very different from the sounds of the protest songs of folk singers such as Vladimir Vysotsky and Karel Kryl. "But, of course, Vysotsky's lyrics were very important and influential to the young Soviet rockers who began writing original songs in Russian. He was the Russian Bob Dylan," says the American.

### **They took advantage of the King. . . .**

Yeager says Rock & Roll initially caused fear in America's adults who thought it would lead to ruination of their children. But, when the government saw how the

music overwhelmed and controlled their youth, they quickly tried to use this music culture and its associated personalities to their advantage.

"It's my opinion that Elvis Presley was forced to join the U.S. Army for Cold War propaganda purposes, but I have been unable to prove it so far. Imagine, in 1958. . . Elvis Presley was the most famous person on the planet. Everyone knew who he was. He was rich. And suddenly, during a period of peace - between the Korean and Vietnamese Wars – the government pulls him into the Army. It does not make sense. Everyone else at that time who was rich, or famous or had political connections and influence was able to avoid military service. And, they didn't bring him into the service to publicize him at a high profile recruiting office in New York," he said. "They sent him to a tank brigade in West Germany just 50 kilometers from the Czech border and the Iron Curtain! Every day during those two years he was stationed in West Germany, the entire Western media based in West Germany - the Americans, British, French and the West Germans made broadcasts across the Iron Curtain about the activities of Private Elvis Presley. And, every two months they released a new song that Elvis had recorded in America before leaving for Europe. When he completed his military service and returned to America, the East German communist press printed the headline: **Elvis Presley, Public Enemy Number One!**" Yeager chuckles, how the communist media so seriously took the political weight of one singer from Mississippi.

When Yeager was asked if the secret services were targeting rock, Yeager answers, "No, not initially with the Americans." "Music is an organic phenomenon. It was not manageable," he responds. "At least at first". . . he gives a moment of reflection. "But when Radio Free Europe, which was controlled by CIA, began to broadcast Top 40 radio broadcasts of America's hit records to Eastern Europe in 1958 in the local languages, while describing the lives of the singers and the meaning of their songs to the Eastern European teens, the U.S. government became involved and added rock music and its singers as weapons in their Cold War arsenal. At the same time, it's important to note that on the other side of the Wall, the Kremlin and its secret services were convinced that the CIA created Rock & Roll."

### **Slovenský underground? . . . .**

The film contains footage from the Beach Boys concert in Prague, as well as the saxophonist Vratislav Brabenec from the famous Prague underground band Plastic People of the Universe, and it shows the dissident Václav Havel and Alexander Dubcek during Prague Spring. The documentarians also talked with the well-known Czech artist Peter Sís and the Czech UN Ambassador Martin Palous, who was the brother-in-law of the founder of the Plastic People, Milan Hlavsa.

As far as Slovakia is concerned within Czechoslovakia, Slovakian bands are not

found in the film. No wonder. When discussing the subject of the Slovak underground, Czech television filmed a documentary a few years ago that noted there was no such thing as socialism and an underground in Slovakia. The word underground was not even used. There wasn't a band like the Plastic People in Slovakia. There was more cohesion in the Czech Republic, not with us. Only here was the Mother, but of another kind. Slovak Mother, "We will all hug each other one day," Slovak actor Ján Sedal says with humor in the underground film *Fenomen*.

In the 1960s, the Communist Party declared the Vlasáči Action (Action Against Long Hair). "A very large part of the institutions were involved, coordinated by the Interior Ministry. Long hair was not associated with delinquency in Slovakia. But in the Czech lands, there was unparalleled admiration for Western culture and lifestyle," says historian Petr Blažek. "The Slovaks wanted to have peace," according to Iva Hoffman and Oleg Pastiera, "they did not need to burn their IDs. Freedom and music were taken personally rather than politically."

### **For Dubcek. . . .**

Producer Doug Yeager recalls that his team had a difficult time securing film footage from either Slovakia or the Czech Republic. "We have a scene at the Beach Boys concert in Prague in the film. It was provided to us by the Beach Boys. The song "Break Away," performed by the Beach Boys in the film, was originally written about a personal relationship, but the lyrics also happened to fit perfectly with the story of Czechoslovakia's struggle for freedom as it tried to break away from the Soviet Union." And, Yeager noted, "At the concert in Prague, the Beach Boys announced on stage that they dedicated the song to Dubcek."

Although the film is based on a thesis which he and his colleagues worked to prove, the film includes not only the words and thoughts of the Americans, but a number of testimonies from the Eastern countries. They therefore made an effort to balance their opinions. Whomever remembers Moscow in 1991, when American rock stars like AC/DC and Metallica performed, they should believe the words of Artemy Troitsky, a Russian journalist and rock expert in the Soviet Union. He wrote that rock music started spreading like a virus. Music has a great impact, especially on young people who were against the coercive methods by which the past regime gained obedience. The detractors did not take them seriously. The young rockers and their fans were children who did not have their own children and were less afraid of their parents. And, they weren't afraid when the government threatened that they would be barred from the university or that they would be sent off to a terrible place. It was hard to tame the youth.

At the end of the film, Metallica is seen playing at a Moscow concert, where a million fans have arrived. But according to Doug Yeager, the music that most

influenced the protests in the East, may be ascribed to another band, Pink Floyd and their song “Another Brick in the Wall.”

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