

Stories from the Highlands that We Don't Want to Listen To

Although the theme of this year's colloquy is the highlands, each of us will certainly include more than just the familiar landscape beyond the nearest hill. Instead, it generally brings to mind rough country, more or less distant from civilization, a place where since time immemorial music originated – raw, connected to nature. This is about music which has already been disentangled from big cities and internet networks through its nature, and music whose authors never had easy lives. Such music is connected with unbelievably powerful stories, but many people who have been brought up in the spoon-fed way of a simplistic world refuse to listen to it. Others consider this “third world” music to be inferior, because for them it is unable to rise up to the greatness of Beethoven, Elvis Presley, or others. Furthermore, they don't even don't believe the stories contained in the music. *“Am I to believe that by the age of twelve he was on drugs shooting at people in the jungle and now composes better songs than Oasis?”* It is difficult to explain to such people that this music, which has been shaped by a thousand-year long tradition, may in its instrumentation and content surpass the barrel organ bubbles coming from the “McDonald's-like music factories”. They perceive music differently, judging it exclusively and authoritatively by western standards.

Have you noticed recently how the success of pop-music albums is being judged? By the millions of dollars spent, without any comment on the quality of the album, or on how good or bad the music is. Instead you read that within the first week of the sales the album made so and so much money. Closely linked with the present times, the perversity of this measure, which basically transforms everything into money, turns music into a consumer commodity, comparable to cars, laundry detergents or dog food.

The production of music albums already in advance calculates in the cost of aggressive hard-sell advertising, which ensures the attention of the public even for the most stupid product. An old prediction is slowly coming true: that only a fraction of the population will be interested in art – in music that is meaningful, creative, extensive, and deep. Brainwashed listeners of mass culture thus find themselves in an

artificially created virtual environment where the acceptance of an album is no longer determined by quality or a professional evaluation, but rather a strategy with a clear objective: to create something from recycled pop music that makes zero demands on the intellect, music that speaks about a cartoon world increasingly distant from the harsh realities of civilization. When such a strategy is taken on the whole, it can even include thousands of anti-depressants, medicine that precludes the possibility of any alternative.

Furthermore, to prevent a listener from getting off this merry-go-round, show business creates pop-stars as quickly as Bata shoes, or in the same way that old matadors are made to become clowns. Trends and nu-style labels are being created under the pretence of being something new, and using tactics that keep the customer in a head-lock. The difference between reality and outright lying and confusion is being wiped away.

This fertile ground has given rise to the brotherhood of what were once quality social and music magazines and radio with cheap tabloid press, consecrated with monstrously demagogic bottom-aiming mediocrity; this is a brotherhood which makes it a rule to treat everything that it has not invented with suspicion and arrogance. The media go hand in hand with show business, fine tuning the calculatedness of the game to utmost perfection. It is worthwhile to take a look around us: many people have accepted life in such a uniform, spiritually debilitating "Stepford world" as a fact. Experience and stories are created neither by them nor by art, but by show business, creating the kinds that are in the best interest of business.

It is no wonder that writer Jiří Kratochvíl claims that we have moved into a period satiated with banal, desperately hollow and superficial stories that say absolutely nothing about life, but merely speak about the precise fictitious world. For a decade, the same has been a problem for music publicists. They complain that there are no stories available in contemporary rock and pop, that there is nothing to write about; they do not consider the marvellous, thousand-year-old stories that are connected to world music. While the old publicists have slowly been washing their hands of the problem and remembering the old days when "reading about rock and pop was as important as concert-going and listening to recordings", the young and restless repeat the histories of rock veterans at nauseam, comparing them dully with the recordings of contemporaries, or finding uniqueness in their copies.

Five years ago, when the ex-editor-in-chief of *Rock&Pop* Vojta Lindaur wrote this, it sounded like something close to a catastrophe;

today it represents the plain truth. I quote: *“Very soon, music journalism – as compared to that of the 1960s and 1970s – will play no role.”*

The disconsolate Vojta, who witnessed the broadening crisis of the music press and perhaps already suspected the coming of dilettantes, was focused on much on his beloved rock when he continued: *“The more the flat personalities are pushed into the forefront of hit parades, the more boring their stories are, if there are any at all.”* Furthermore, this all was topped by influential pop music commentator Josef Zub Vlček: *“You can escape from this issue and take refuge in the world of world music or experimental avant-garde, but then you are going to be writing about music that 99.9% of readers will never hear. Some music critics feel fine doing this, but they are exclusive. Who is actually interested in reading it?”* This is a conscious resignation, an acceptance of the victory of mediocrity.

I specialize in world music, because rock to me – with some exceptions – has become impossible to listen to. There is no drive in it, no message, and it goes round in circles. Occasionally, when I stop by at a festival and visit the main stage, where all the latest rock icons are prancing around, I am astonished by their effort and faith in passing off replicas as originals. Should I write about them? What could I say? The stories you read about them – by anybody, unfortunately – are about how they got high, destroyed a hotel, raped a girl, or how many times they were in prison, treatment clinics or asylums.

Nevertheless, you get goose bumps from reading a story about the Tuaregese Tinariwen: they were not pursued by executors, but by military commandos; they were exposed to music not at school, but amidst battle. In refugee camps, they slept with a guitar on the one side of the bed and a machine gun on the other. They witnessed the executions of their parents, without any prospects for the future. They were deprived of their homes, humiliated, and now they sing about it. They do not need to invent anything or embellish; they play their own very vibrant and urgent music which is rooted in thousand-year-old foundations. The texts of black rappers from American and west European city ghettos expose street violence, drugs, murders between rival gangs, and sharp-anti social proclamations (which are sometimes beyond belief). At the same time, listening to their fellow musicians running for their lives in Africa, you feel sure that they are keeping much of their rough experiences to themselves. Take for instance child soldier Emanuel Jal from Sudan, who even quite recently was shooting from his AK47, or poet and rapper K'Naan from Somalia, who saved his life miraculously while leaving

murderous commandos.

What about the life story of Marriem Hassna, who has been surviving in refugee camps in the south of Algeria for twenty-five years? Ask Mari Boine or Alan Stivel to speak about the recent experience of the Sami or Britons in civilized Europe. Ask Oki about the 1990s, when his nation, the Ains, the original inhabitants of Japan, were not allowed to use their native language.

South African trumpet player Hugh Masekela stated: "*Rough stories from Africa that touch politics and are unbelievable are not on the order of the day. There are other stories that are preferred – the smooth, cautious renditions by Bono or Bob Geldof, who are able – to the joy of production companies and sellers of commercials – to attract crowds of hundreds of thousands of people to stadiums all over the world. If you calculated the total costs of the famous concerts for aid to Africa, the money collected at such shows would, paradoxically, not exceed the costs by very much.*" The forthright Masekela (husband of Mamma Africa singer Miriam Makeba) continues: "*It is a superficially compassionate friendship which would not have originated if it did not earn money. It shows a picture of contemporary Africa to the world, but it is the picture created by Europeans.*"

Who could then be surprised when European politicians claim that multiculturalism does not work? According to them, the issue must be handled differently, but how, they do not know. Basically, they are floundering on this issue. That is no wonder. They have underestimated their own abilities, religious diversity, and different life styles. On the other hand, they have overestimated their thoughtless and disrespectful cabinet directives about how to implant exotic cultures into the European consciousness.

The question can be put differently: what if they have not listened to the stories from the immigrants themselves, but have allowed the stories to be pre-told by somebody else in a shifted form? In doing so, they would have postponed an urgent issue that is bound to burst anyway. This is because without immigrants there would soon be problems in Europe, in that it would face extinction, as is generally known. If Europe does not cope with multicultural co-existence and with the truths contained in the stories written by life (not by professional manipulators), they will soon face what pessimists now threaten will come: Islamisation or something similar. In other words, Europeans will stop playing the leading role in their own Europe. This could happen as a result of having refused to listen to the stories from elsewhere.