

## **CAPITAL, IRONY, AND NOSTALGIA: THE MALINA BROTHERS AND BLUEGRASS**

*Lee Bidgood*

I last traveled to the Czech Republic in 2018, during the celebration of the founding of Czechoslovakia 1918. In addition to the more high-brow centennial content like concerts, exhibitions, and lectures, I came across advertisements that included elements of an idealized past. This commercialized nostalgia caused me to think critically about how nostalgia was coloring my perceptions and decisions – and to think about the value of nostalgia for the Czech makers of bluegrass-related music with whom I did my fieldwork. Considering the contexts of populism and pandemic in which fear prevails, I will discuss the Malina Brothers, Americanist Czech musicians (Bidgood 2017: 129-130) for whom nostalgia might serve as a form of capital, and a way to negotiate towards hope in a dark time.

### **Bluegrass and Nostalgia**

Bluegrass draws on the history of Country music, including Blackface minstrelsy, which forged American popular music's particular mixture of sentimental longing for the past with articulations of power by elite groups (Linn 1994). Barn dance radio and television shows in the mid-1900s continued this tradition, with commercials selling old-fashioned and new-fangled products backed up by banjos, mandolins, and guitars that were themselves a mixture of old and new (Berry, 2008). In the 1950s when bluegrass was distinguished from other forms of country music, musicians, fans, and other stakeholders celebrated the acoustic instruments, old-fashioned song lyrics, and down-home manner of bluegrass, contrasting them with the raucous new sounds of rock and roll (and implicitly its links to black rhythm and blues) – of course this stance disregarded the importance of Afro-American elements in bluegrass (Brady 2013).

Recent calls to “Make America Great Again” include a vague longing for the 1950s, and are an example of what Svetlana Boym calls “restorative nostalgia.” By enacting immigration restriction,

limits on forms of expression, and support for an idealized traditional family (Reuters 2018), nationalist and populist groups have sought to gain power by capitalizing on loss and fear – responding to a desire to make things “like they used to be.”

Nostalgia is a powerful tool for dealing with loss; centuries after physician Johannes Hofer coined the term in 1688 (Boym 2001: 1-18), psychological studies indicate that nostalgia can help provide meaning in life (Routledge et al. 2011). Bluegrass songs of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century seek this kind of meaning through evocation of the past, for example *Tennessee 1949*, written by Pete Goble and Leroy Drumm. In the fifth verse the narrator reports that they have “searched the wide world over” for something that they “don’t recall and couldn’t find;” they end up “searching pictures in my memory, for Tennessee 1949” and in the chorus declare that “it would be so fine, if I could just go back to 1949” (Thompson 2018).

In *Tennessee 1949* the protagonist seeks to return to an idealized past, to “restore” it – if only in fantasy. In addition to restorative tendencies that are usually serious, Svetlana Boym describes a “reflective nostalgia” that is more playful, ironic, and humorous (Boym 2001: 49). John Hartford’s song *Back in the Goodle Days* (a play on the English phrase “back in the good old days”) is an example. The final verse twists the song’s lyrical hook by proposing that future action will take place in the past: “Oh we did it then and we’ll do it yet, back in the Goodle Days” – a turn that emphasizes the absurdity of our fascination with the past.

Of course, as in Boym’s account of post-Communist memory, the restorative and reflective are often in dialogue. For most of a decade I have coached students in my courses in Bluegrass, Old-Time and Roots Music at East Tennessee State University to debate that “bluegrass music today is primarily characterized by innovation” – or, in other cases (to shift the tone of the exercise) that it is characterized by tradition. The debate is always spirited, but the conclusion at the end is usually that bluegrass (as a business, a style, and a mode of community-building) is innovative and traditional, that it is a form of music making that allows participants to both restore faithfully and reflect critically on the past.

## The Malina Brothers and Nostalgia

The Malina Brothers are a contemporary Czech group whose work evokes reflective connections to the past. A quartet, their group is made up of three family members – Luboš, Pavel, and Pepa Malina – joined by bassist Pavel Peroutka. The group is rooted not only in their common connection to the region around the city of Náchod, but also in the distinctive Americanist music making that has flourished generally in the Czech context and specifically in the Náchod area since the heyday of groups like the White Stars, Rangers/*Plavci*, and Greenhorns/*Zelenáci*. During the 1960s-70s these groups created a mix of country, folk, and bluegrass music – a blend that Tom Dickins has coined “Folk-Spectrum music” – that was commercially successful and very present in the mainstream of popular music (Dickins 2017). The Malinas’ repertoire refers to this “golden age” when folk-spectrum music flourished with songs retexted for local use by songwriter Miroslav Jaroš (Mirek Skunk Jaroš), for example retextings of Tom T. Hall’s *Faster Horses* and Hank Cochran’s *Make the World Go Away* as *Rychlejší koně* and *Nech svět at’ se točí dál*.

In addition to their music, the band communicates visually, with images from the American West: the art for their 2013 album *Rychlejší koně* presents a cowboy boot (complete with spur) on the cover; on the back panel of their 2015 disc made with Nashville country music star Charlie McCoy, a cowboy hat hangs on a hook above the track listing. The band’s stage setup for their 2019 tours included a number of blankets featuring native American designs. When the group came to our home in Tennessee a shoe store that sold cowboy boots was a highlight of their visit.

Boym describes reflective nostalgia as “more oriented toward an individual narrative that savors details and memorial signs, perpetually deferring homecoming itself” (Boym 2001: 49). The Malinas’ longest tours have been in the United States, where they have learned to create interstitial niches of “home away from home” through music and the social interactions that draw audiences into liminal zones of possibility.

The Malinas create these sorts of interstitial spaces through their use of the song *Flowers on the Wall*, (written by Lew DeWitt and

popularized by the Statler Brothers in the 1960s) which Luboš first heard on a record purchased by his parents, and later heard in Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film *Pulp Fiction*. In playing the song the Malina Brothers create a combination of connections and meanings; literary theorist Linda Hutcheon proposes that "...nostalgia is not something you 'perceive' in an object; it is what you 'feel' when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you and, often, carry considerable emotional weight (Hutcheon 1998: 4)." *Flowers on the Wall* can be a point of connection to audiences' distinctly Czech connoisseurship of American country music, a connection to childhood memories, or a cosmopolitan connection to contemporary cinema.

### **Irony, Nostalgia, and Capital**

Ethnomusicologist Mark Dewitt's discussion of social capital in a music scene highlights the importance of bonding and bridging connections to the sustainability of a community – connections that operate within boundaries of family, community, or group, and those which cut across social divisions (DeWitt 2009:24). We could see *Flowers on the Wall* as reinforcing elements that we might consider as "Česká Country" (i.e. something that might play on distinctively Czech station *Country Radio*) or as something that might be discussed at a cosmopolitan conversation during the intermission of a concert at the *Folkové prázdniny* in Náměšť nad Oslavou.

Things aren't all positive; nostalgia can be a part of exclusion, especially in a climate of populism and nationalism. Routledge et al (2011) indicate that nostalgia can increase social connectedness. A government or other regime could be supported by situations in which common feelings of nostalgia lead to exclusion – as with the immigration and family policies I mentioned earlier.

I will conclude with a bit of hope. I am inspired by people who go against the cultural inertia that leads us to contention and personal gain. In his discussion of social capital, DeWitt tells the story of accordion player Danny Poullard, a tradition-bearing elder in the Northern California cajun music and dance scene who has freely shared his expertise with beginners – he even teaches lessons

for free. Poullard's actions defy the logic of capitalism, which would expect exchange of economic capital for cultural capital. We usually pay for what we receive. Interpreting Poullard's strategy using theories of social capital, DeWitt describes it as "stable," and significantly, as sustainable (Dewitt 2009: 23).

It is my hope that Americanist artistic entrepreneurs like the Malina Brothers can continue to negotiate a sustainable career through their reframing of bluegrass and country music within Czech sensibilities, including irony and nostalgia. Linda Hutcheon points out productive links between the two: "The ironizing of nostalgia [...] may be one way the postmodern has of taking responsibility for such responses by creating a small part of the distance necessary for reflective thought about the present as well as the past" (Hutcheon 1998: 7). The Malinas' creation of reflective (rather than restoratively) nostalgic experiences indicate that it might still be possible to draw from the past in ways that are viable in terms of ethics and economics as well as aesthetics.

## **Bibliography:**

- BERRY, Chad (ed.). 2008. *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- BIDGOOD, Lee. 2017. *Czech Bluegrass: Notes from the Heart of Europe*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- BOYM, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- BRADY, Erika. 2013. "Contested Origins: Arnold Shultz and the Music of Western Kentucky." In *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*, edited by Diane Pecknold. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 100-118.
- DEWITT, Mark. 2009. "Louisiana Creole bals de maison in California and accumulation of social capital." *The world of music* 51 (1): 17-34.
- DICKINS, Tom. 2017. "Folk-Spectrum Music as an Expression of Alterity in 'Normalization' Czechoslovakia (1969-89): Context, Constraints, and Characteristics." *The Slavonic and East European Review* 95 (4): 648-690.
- LINN, Karen. 1994. *That Half-Barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture*. Urbana, University of Illinois Press.
- ROUTLEDGE, Clay – ARNDT, Jamie – WILDSCHEUT, Tim – SEDIKIDES, Constantine – HART, Claire M. – JUHL, Jacob – VINGERHOETS, Ad J. – SCHOLTZ, Wolf. 2011. "The past makes the present meaningful: Nostalgia as an existential resource." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101: 638-652.

## Electronic Sources:

- “Hungary will defend traditional families, stop demographic decline, Orban says.” *Reuters* [online] 25. 5. 2018 [accessed February 7, 2021]. Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-orban/hungary-will-defend-traditional-families-stop-demographic-decline-orban-says-idUSKCN1IQ0V8>>.
- HUTCHEON, Linda. 1998. “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern.” [online] [accessed February 7, 2021]. Available at: <<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html>>. Printed version: “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern.” In: *Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory*, edited by Raymond Vervliet and Annemarie Estor. 189-207. Amsterdam - Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000.
- THOMPSON, Richard. 2018. “Pete Goble Remembered” *Bluegrass Today* [online] 6. 12. [accessed February 7, 2021]. Available at: <<https://bluegrasstoday.com/pete-goble-remembered/>>.

## Media Sources:

- Hartford, John 1971. *Aero-Plain*. LP recording. Warner Brothers, WS 1916.
- Malina Brothers 2013. *Rychlejší koně*. CD recording. Pepa Malina, M201502.
- Malina Brothers 2015. *Malina Brothers and Charlie McCoy*. CD recording. Pepa Malina, M201302.
- “Tennessee 1949 [1987] - Bill Emerson & Pete Goble.” *YouTube* [online] [accessed March 7, 2021]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IySLtWiHcfE>>.

## Summary

In a time of conflict and pandemic, fear is a pervasive reality. Nostalgia is one resort for us as we deal with the everyday realities of the current world. This presentation attends to contemporary bluegrass-related string band music, highlighting elements, strategies, and repercussions of nostalgia. The Malina Brothers, a Czech group who mixes bluegrass and country music, articulate the historical resonances of some parts of their repertory to negotiate between irony and nostalgia (per Hutcheon) and also between reflective and reconstructive nostalgia (per Boym). In addition to pointing out areas in which music-making is a part of fear or other negative reactions, I draw a note of optimism from the work of ethnomusicologist Mark DeWitt, who suggests that musicians sometimes avoid typical neoliberal patterns for the exchange of capital. The work of the Malina Brothers hints at ways that the nostalgia can provide means for dealing in sustainable ways with contemporary situations.

**Key words:** Czech bluegrass; social capital of music; nostalgia in music; Malina Brothers.