

CZECH BANJOISTS AND INTERNET MEMES: A NEW GENERATION OF BLUEGRASS-RELATED COMICS

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This project began when I noticed posts to Facebook by Czech bluegrass music makers that combined images with text and made me laugh. I began collecting these posts to add to my ongoing survey of Czech bluegrassers' creation of and discourse on their activities and community. I collected 25 posts between 2022 and 2024, categorized them using tools from current discourse on internet memes, and analyzed their content thematically. [I have used pseudonyms for the individual Facebook users in this written version of this report due to privacy concerns.]

To learn about the internet meme phenomenon, I located academic sources and also consulted the knowyourmeme.com site, a layperson-oriented but extensive reference resource. Current scholarship on participatory online culture often focuses on globally circulated images and ideas, especially elements from mass media—many of the posts I consider are much more local. In addition, some posts seem to be “memes” and other are more in the genre of “comics” per Harvey’s definition of comics as “pictorial narratives or expositions in which words (often lettered into the picture area within speech balloons) usually contribute to the meaning of the pictures and vice versa” (Harvey 2001: 76), suggest a connection to previous generations of Czech musicians who created humorous visual culture as a part of their non-commercial (or at least largely recreational) Americanist projects, and their negotiation between global and local scenes as well as idealistic and cynical views on society.¹ In the following paragraphs

1. I typically classify a one-panel visual/text unit as a cartoon (one that can be humorous, satirical, etc.), and use the term “comics” for multi-panel, humorous narrative art/text productions. The Czech producers and readers of the media I focused on here used the term “comics” (and its Czech equivalent “komiks”) to refer to both cartoons and comics.

I provide some background on internet memes, using images that I collected as illustrative examples, and indicating some of the key themes in my data sample.

Internet Memes

First, some context on the concept of a meme. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term “meme” in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* to refer to units of culture that are analogous to “genes”—as Dawkins states, “[w]e need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (Dawkins 1989: 182). Internet meme scholar Bradley Wiggins defines this unit as: “a remixed, iterated message that can be rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity.” (Wiggins 2019: 11) For instance, creators of these meme examples might be poking fun at the value of either memes or Dawkins’ work—this ambiguity makes memes even more potent in our networked and socially and politically polarized present.

Some images, like a well-circulated set of impossible guitar chords (with fingers contorted over, or even sticking through, guitar fretboards, on, around, and under strings, etc.) go “viral” on social media—this one I found was circulating for at least a year before a Czech mandolinist posted it on February 12, 2022, according to the tracking site knowyourmeme.com.² Images like this one illustrate impossible situations, and resonate with musicians as they surmount challenges of technique, interpretation, etc. This theme of difficulty and struggle was common in the posts I analyzed. (Fig. 1)

Meme specialists use the term “image macro” to describe captioned images that are used to convey feelings or reactions in an online community. The image macro is one of the most prevalent and oldest forms of internet memes, dating to the mid-2000s³.

2. “YouTube tutorial video: hello guys! Today I’m gonna show you some simple beginner guitar chords!” *Know Your Meme* [online] [accessed July 27, 2024]. Available at: <<https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2105273>>.
3. “Image Macros.” *Know Your Meme* [online] [accessed July 27, 2024]. Available at: <<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/image-macros>>.



Fig. 1. This image posted to Facebook in 2022 uses a set of impossible guitar chords to comment on the difficulty of playing bluegrass music

The “macro” element reveals this label’s origins in the computer nerd community⁴. (Fig. 2)

Among Czech bluegrassers different labels are recognized, for example, those of instrument makers. Gibson guitars are often more highly valued than those from the Epiphone firm—a feeling that is reflected in a globally-circulated image macro posted by a Czech musician on July 11, 2022 that compares an image of

4. “Image Macros.” *Wikipedia* [online] [accessed July 27, 2024]. Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image_macro>.



Fig. 2. Re-posting this image macro internet meme allows the poster and their readers to establish themselves within a cosmopolitan hierarchy of knowledge about the field of musical instruments

actor Mel Gibson (labelled as such) with another actor with similar appearance but much less robust physical characteristics with the label “Mel Epiphone” that implies that this actor is “less than” Gibson in a way that corresponds to the musical instrument hierarchy. A Czech reposting of this image indicates that Czech bluegrassers’ connoisseurship of American-made musical instruments includes a hierarchy parallel to the one that exists in the United States.

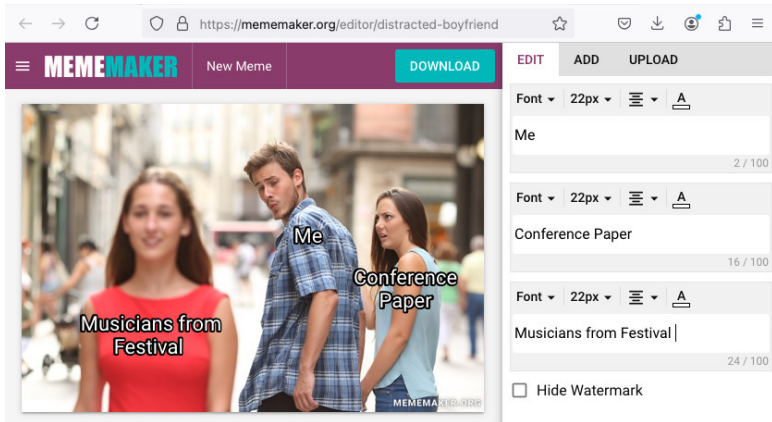


Fig. 3. I used the mememaker.org site to create this remix of the “distracted boyfriend” meme

One goal of posts that I analyzed was to establish the credibility of the poster within the community, and within the sort of hierarchies that divide community members. (Fig. 3)

Object labeling memes allow creators to position themselves regarding hierarchies and other social frameworks through labelling of existing images⁵. The “distracted boyfriend” is a common form that dates to 2017. In my engagement with this phenomenon, I created a meme that speaks to how distracted I was in my paper writing by listening to music by this year’s performers at the Folkové prázdniny festival⁶, and to show how easy it is to create memes these days. “Exploitable” is the term for a meme template like this which encourages customization such as modification or addition of text or manipulating objects in the image.

My sample doesn’t include any remixes of the “Distracted Boyfriend,” but I did collect a version of “The Rock Driving,”

5. “Object Labeling.” *Know Your Meme* [online] [accessed July 27, 2024]. Available at: <<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/object-labeling>>.

6. The colloquium at which I presented this paper is associated with this festival, with a range of distracting international artists such as Iva Bittová, Pátí na světě, Kelly Hunt, the Firelight Trio, and Barbora Xu.



Fig. 4. This “exploitable” allows Czech bluegrassers to tell their own comic stories using a framework taken from global popular culture

an exploitable series of screen captures from the 2009 film *Race to Witch Mountain*. The series starts with a frame in which the driver asks the passenger a question, followed by a frame that shows the passenger’s response, and then a frame in which the driver shows surprise at this answer.⁷ In his post of May 16, 2024,

7. “The Rock Driving.” *Know Your Meme* [online] [accessed July 27, 2024]. Available at: <<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-rock-driving>>.

a Czech banjoist uses this framework to wish a fellow banjoist “Happy Birthday” and engages in one of the moves that I observed in many posts, playfully elevating a peer to celebrity status. The driver’s leading comment is that he recently saw a Czech bluegrass band’s performance. The passenger replies that the other day they held the banjoist’s instrument, which sparks the driver’s astounded reaction. The joke here is that the meme’s two characters compete to establish their proximity to a Czech bluegrass musician who otherwise doesn’t receive that sort of attention. (Fig. 4)

Eighteen of the 25 posts that I collected were from a single musician, a mandolin player who has been an active part of the Czech bluegrass scene with bands I have seen for years at festivals, in clubs, and in the community discourse—to preserve anonymity I refer to him here as “Pepa”. Many of these posts are directed at a banjo player (whom I identify here as “Honza”) who is similarly deeply involved with the community and is also a frequent performer on the scene.

As I mentioned above, a common theme is the effort of musicians—Honza is often shown struggling with challenges common for Czech bluegrassers, such as singing in English. In an image macro post from August 11, 2022, this banjoist sings Czech-phoneticized English lyrics, with a playful mondegreen “I’ll wear your underwear tonight” instead of “I wonder where you are tonight” (from the eponymous song by Johnny Bond), a Czech-localized version of a joke that I have also heard in the United States. Here, Honza also receives the mock celebrity status at play in the above-mentioned example of “The Rock Driving” meme, with a similar joke of mock celebrity. (Fig. 5)

Another banjo player, part of a regionally-active bluegrass band, created three of the posts in my sample, and in one from October 30, 2022 uses a historical photo of a woman playing the banjo as the chassis for his meme of mock praise for Honza; an added thought bubble contains the Czech text “Už mi to zní skoro stejně jako Honzovi,” which roughly means in English: “Now I almost sound like Honza.” The focus on this person as an internet meme/comic character—who appears as a banjo player—points to the

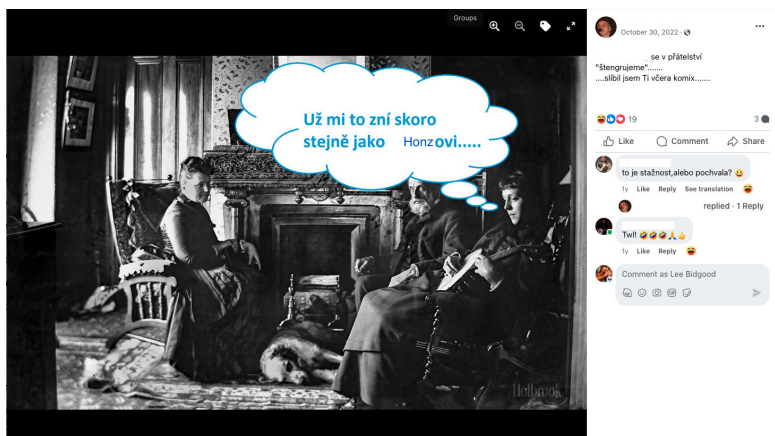


Fig. 5. This homemade meme/comic adds a humorous text to an image, directing mock praise at a certain musician in the Czech bluegrass community

legacy of comedy involving the banjo and banjo players that dates to the 19th century blackface minstrel shows. These comedic and dramaturgical tropes have been used by US string band musicians ever since, and are not far distant from racial stereotypes, as they mock and denigrate to some degree the musician who plays the African-derived banjo—declaring them stupid, backwards, etc. (Klein 2020: 92).

Race might be submerged here; closer to the surface we see a mocking of Czech bluegrassers as ignorant or “small” while the endeavor of bluegrass as a whole is seen as a noble struggle. This dichotomy recalls anthropologist Ladislav Holý’s theorizing of “the Little Czech” and the “Great Czech Nation,” in which grand ideals of the society are in sharp contrast to the imperfect individuals who comprise it (Holý 1996). This duality leads to a discussion of larger historical and media contexts, and the cases of two bluegrass-related artists who have worked in other media in an earlier generation.

Bluegrass and Comics

I first met with the musical work of Jan Vyčítal (1942–2020), that he made with the Greenhorns; he retexted songs into Czech that reached Czechoslovak audiences of “tramp”, country, and folk music in the 1970s such as “Oranžový expres” (“Orange Blossom Special”, “El Paso”, and “Zatracenej život” (“Before I Met You”—as for the latter, the *Literární noviny* necrology explains, “to je ta písnička, kde zpíváte *Jupí, čerte!*” (“that’s the song where you sing Yippee, you devil!” Fencel 2020). Another obituary notes: “...he studied promotional graphics at a secondary art school. He then started working in the art department of Czechoslovak Television and quickly established himself as a caricaturist and artist with a characteristic style” (Kuchyňová 2020).⁸ This particular style is visible in Vyčítal’s artwork on the Greenhorns’ record covers: in his cartoonish drawings, features and gestures are exaggerated, and mouths gape to shout in all-capitals.

Vyčítal’s caricatures and cartoons were also circulated as standalone pieces. A common setting is the distinctive Czech outdoor recreation of tramping. One particular piece brings the outdoors into the boudoir; in this standalone image a man returns home from his travels to find his wife in a revealing pose and the boy heroes of the *Rychlé šípy* (Swift Arrows) comic book gang hiding in the bedroom wardrobe—a joke that hinges on readers’ familiarity with this series and its emphasis on wholesome youth. These characters from a different comics “world” contrast visually with their surroundings, as if they were added by collage.⁹ The visual allusion to the *Rychlé šípy*’s sleek tidiness in this drawing clashes with the rougher and more eccentrically abject outlines of Vyčítal’s illustrated world. Vyčítal seems to foreground the grotesque and to push against what is acceptable, especially in male behavior.

8. Translation by the author: “...vystudoval obor propagační grafika na střední výtvarné škole. Poté začal pracovat ve výtvarném oddělení Československé televize a rychle se prosadil jako karikaturista a výtvarník s typickým rukopisem.”

9. Image not included here due to copyright.

The Rychlé šípy series, meanwhile, foregrounds ideals of male behavior grounded in chivalry and propriety. This series was authored by Jaroslav Foglar (1907–1999) and since its revival in the 1960s has been illustrated by Marko Čermák (b. 1940), a banjoist and part of the Greenhorns/Zelenáči¹⁰ phenomenon with Vyčítal. Čermák frames the world differently with his drawings: human figures are realistic or hyper-realistically ideal in their smoothness. This visual aesthetic supports the sublime themes that Jirásek finds in the Rychlé šípy series: “...physical activity and health, a romantic landscape and dwelling in nature, the ethical aspects of morality and goodness, [...] the importance of romance, adventure and challenges.” (Jirásek 2020) While they are widely held and idealized, some Americanist values and dreams held by Czech bluegrassers often confront a discouraging *realita* (reality) – the sublime and abject often mix with each other.

Discussion: Themes of Ownership

An internet meme—an exploitable of the kind that I used in making my own meme—posted by the banjoist Honza on August 21, 2022, includes a remix of imagery from the 1999 film *Toy Story 2*¹¹, and outlines a dream of playing bluegrass. The first panel outlines an idealistic plan and an unrealistic expectation: The image of Woody and Buzz accompanies the Czech text “Pojd’, koupíme si super nástroje a budem hrát bluegrass jako bohové” (“Come on, we’ll buy super instruments and we’ll play bluegrass like gods”). The second, labeled “Očekávání” (“Expectation”) shows the Lonesome River Band, a top contemporary US bluegrass group, caught in live performance. The third, labeled “Realita” (“Reality”) is not taken from a U.S. source—it shows a familiar scene in Czech

10. The English name of the band was used until censors forced the band to change to use a Czech term. Elsewhere (Bidgood 2017: 35–36) I discuss the political significance of the English language for bluegrass musicians and the censors who controlled official discourse and performance – it is significant that bottom-up activity was less controlled by the state than top-down professional activity, and English was likely more common in informal, DIY culture that took place in private spheres.

11. “X, X Everywhere.” *Know Your Meme* [online] [accessed July 27, 2024]. Available at: <<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/x-x-everywhere>>.

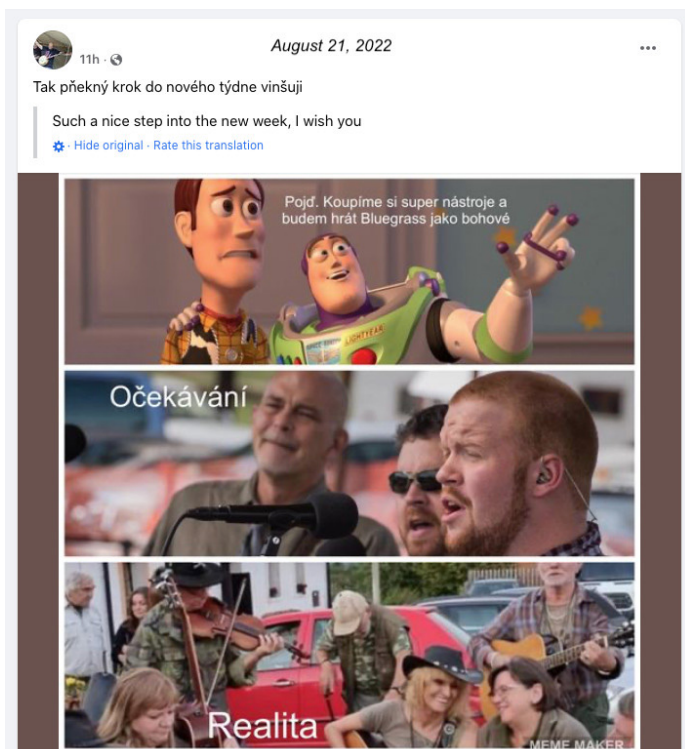


Fig. 6. This exploitable meme's images, taken from a U.S. film, provides a playful frame for delivering mock praise

bluegrass-related scenes: a group of older people, a mix of men and women, wearing military attire and cowboy hats playing informally in a relaxed—and to my eye—very Czech way. This image could be labeled “country,” “folk” or “tramp,” all with Czech pronunciation and with Central European contexts and histories. (Fig. 6)

This final image conveys a disappointing outcome for bluegrassers like Honza: they seem to engage with the global bluegrass phenomenon as a hierarchy, one in which they are upwardly mobile. These comics show approaching the ideas of technique, style, and atmosphere that they have internalized after immersing themselves

in professionally produced bluegrass media from the United States. This meme indicates that for these players, the quest towards an idealized bluegrass necessitates distancing themselves musically and socially from folk, country, and tramp scenes that are seen as less instrumentally advanced, lacking a certain sort of authenticity, or less cosmopolitan when compared with bluegrass.

This meme juxtaposes dream and reality in a different way than artists of previous generations but shows that Czech bluegrassers and the visual culture that they produce continue to grapple with similar issues of value. The key banjoist might be expressing a something like the “imposter syndrome”, acknowledging some uncertainty that he can attain his goal of performing bluegrass like his American ideals, as a Czech musician, an issue I discuss elsewhere (Bidgood 2017: 69–98).

The importance of images (and instruments, techniques, etc.) drawn from the United States are also part of the mix of values that Czech bluegrassers negotiate through internet memes. Of course, there is a larger context in which the United States features in the global meme-scape. For example, in his study of internet memes about Russia-Ukraine conflicts, Wiggins finds that mass media films from the United States were common in memes supporting Ukraine, as they are in other meme streams (Wiggins 2016: 460). In contrast, my sample of Czech bluegrass memes, especially those by Pepa, the mandolinist who composed most of the posts, are composed of Czech-made media—the exceptions are included in this discussion: the historical photo and the two ready-made exploitable that use images from US commercial films. Most of the mandolinist’s posts, in contrast, use (and transform) photos taken by musicians, or by photographers who participate in the community as semi-or nonprofessionals (analogous in many ways to other participants, few of whom make their living from music making).

The amateur nature of all this cultural production doesn’t mean there isn’t conflict about ownership, however. A community member objected in comments on the mandolinist’s post of November 28, 2022, to his use (without acknowledgment) of a Prague-based photographer’s work. In personal communication the mandolinist

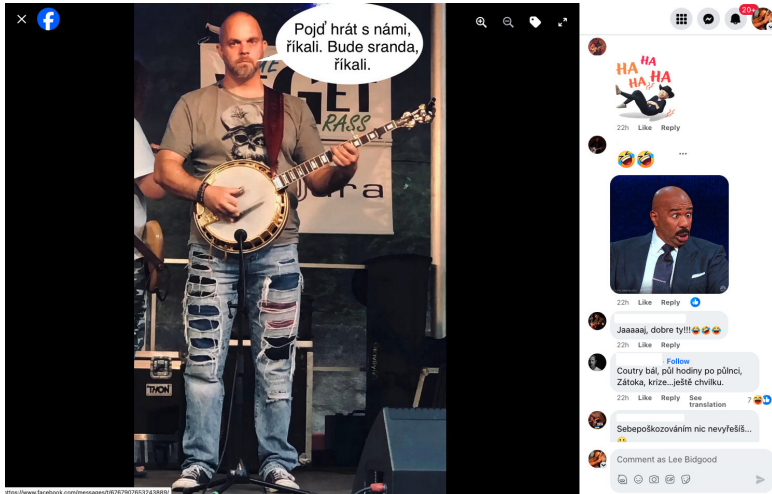


Fig. 7. “Pojď hrát s námi, říkali. Bude sranda, říkali.” (“Come play with us, they said. It will be fun, they said.”)

told me that this complaint discouraged him from making more comics. He sent me an English version of the meme he posted on July 24, 2024, that seems to reflect a jaded perspective on bluegrass, and perhaps also on social media interactions. An image of a banjoist with a blank, tired, or angry facial expression is accompanied by a text that expresses another dream of playing bluegrass (or perhaps engaging in the banter and playful mockery of exchanging internet memes). Perhaps the mandolinist was commenting on losing a bit of the fun that they first made and found in the free play that this medium afforded. (Fig. 7)

Per anthropologist James Clifford, this study is partial in terms of my writing and engagement as an ethnomusicologist and musician (see Bidgood 2017: xi). It is also partial in scope because of my methodology, which depends on my own personal circle of acquaintances as well as the mechanisms Facebook uses to connect

me with Czech bluegrassers and the content they produce. A larger continuation of this study could engage in a deeper way with Czech bluegrassers to collect content from more participants in this kind of online interaction and creativity and could undertake a broader engagement with bluegrass or other musical circles in other locales to compare the thematic threads that make up this sort of discourse in other environments.

This is thus a study of small things: these posts, as niche recreational content within the larger commercial sea of new web media likely will not become viral and circulate globally. Still, as a sample of community discourse, they can indicate how today's Czech bluegrassers continue a generational effort to create their own musical and visual culture between smooth and rough outlines, globalizing from the bottom-up, cultivating local practices and global media that could provide future generations more material for remixing (Bidgood – Příbylová 2022).

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Summary

For Czech bluegrass-related music makers there are generations of visual artists who have linked ideas of Americanism and music with various print media that could be considered “comics.” Marko Čermák’s illustrations for the Rychlé šípy comics series (1938–1989, authored by Jaroslav Foglar) connect Čermák’s musical work—as a significant banjo player in Czech string band music history—with one of the most popular comics in Czech history. The illustrations that Jan Vyčítal added to his musical work with the Greenhorns further link humorous graphics, text, and music. The current generation of Czech string band music makers are finding new ways to make these connections, for example via social media. In light of text-oriented definition of comics, I consider Facebook photo-posts shared by a circle of bluegrass musicians as comics, and consider how they continue and depart from established Czech traditions of bluegrass-related comics—especially attending to graphic-text relations that suggest connections with the abject and the sublime, linkages that tie into Americanist and commercial projects, to personal livelihood and community flourishing.

Key words: Czech bluegrass music, internet memes, comics, humor, social media