The Matadors: A difficult approach to songwriting for a Czech rock group of the 1960s

ALEŠ OPEKAR
Freelance writer

ABSTRACT
In this paper I explore the origination of new songs of the Czech rock group The Matadors. The band derived its style from the British beat and rhythm & blues in the middle of the 1960s and matured the style for their own songwriting. I evaluate and compare official and unofficial historical sources and analyse the character of music and lyrics created by The Matadors.

KEYWORDS: Czech; music; lyrics; rock; rhythm & blues; 1960s.

The Matadors were a Czech rock group from the second half of the 1960s. Their music is an example of an adaptation of the white British rhythm & blues style. In order to research the social and musical context it was necessary to explore official sources such as studio recordings and published articles as well as unofficial historical sources such as various private holdings of musicians, their collaborators and fans. Unofficial sources were very important, especially in connection with the fact that we are speaking about a country with a totalitarian regime with very limited possibilities of free creation. The rock group released only one official LP and several singles. In addition, those official studio recordings were to a great extent limited by censorship, and by the low levels of experience and unwillingness of the studio technical staff. At the time, people employed in recording studios recorded only classical music or commercial pop music and they didn’t understand
the specificity of the rock sound and electric instruments. Therefore the discovery
of some unofficial recordings from the stage was very important to complete the
whole image of the group, and to explore its history and approach to the formation
of new songs. Preserved amateurish films, various manuscripts, postal correspond-
ence and similar documents were also examined³.

**Brief History of the Group**⁴

The Matadors arose in 1965 from the group Fontana (1964), which had roots in
former rock’n’roll groups Komety (1959) and PRA-BE (1960, which meant Prague -
Berlin because students from East Germany were among the members). The
Matadors maintained a connection to East Germany thanks to manager (and former
drummer) Wilfried Jelinek, who is a German born in Czechoslovakia. Among other
things, he negotiated good technical equipment from a German trade fair. The band
rehearsed for a long time without concerts in the Czech lands. The band performed
only in East Germany in the beginning. It was a surprise for Czech fans when the
group introduced a mature performance on the Czech stage in April 1966. The
group had absorbed influences from the top British rock bands of the era: The Kinks,
Them⁵.

I would like to point out that there were no records available with Western rock,
 jazz or pop music, and no TV or radio programs with such music in communist
Czechoslovakia. Because the Czech audience had no chance to hear real original
British rock, The Matadors started to prepare programs called *Beatová maturita*
(meaning secondary school leaving examination, or in German *Das Abitur*). They
would devote a particular concert to only one chosen Western group. During one
concert they played only The Kinks, another day Pretty Things, etc. During the show
they also presented reviews from the foreign press to the audience, especially from
German sources. So their performances sometimes became something like an edu-
cational concert. Such a service for the public was very valuable.

The most important members of The Matadors were Jan “Farmer“ Obermayer on
the keyboards (saxophone eventually), Radim Hladík on lead guitar, Otto Bezloja
on bass and Tony Black (real name Antonín Schwarz) on drums. The lead singer
from 1967 to 1968 was Viktor Sodoma, who replaced singers and rhythm guitarists
Vladimír Mišík and Karel Kahovec, who had been in the group from 1965 to the
end of 1966.

The Matadors released two SP records (1966 and 1968), two EP records (1966
and 1967), and one LP (Supraphon 1968). Another two tracks appeared on an
album compilation *Night Club ’67* (1967). Later on, some raw but very important
recordings from the stage were discovered: sixteen songs or fragments from 20 June
1966 and a fragment of one song from 6 October 1968. Stage recordings better
characterized the nature and meaning of the band for the audience and for the
development of Czech rock music in the 1960s.
Figure 1. The poster to *Beatová maturita* (1967). Archive of Popmuseum, Prague.

Figure 2. The LP cover (Supraphon 1968); from left: Sodoma, Obermayer, Hladík, Bezloja, Black (photo by Martin Hoffmeister).
The band succeeded in performing in the West: they played twice in Belgium and three months in three Swiss night clubs. The story of the band ends in the autumn of 1968. Part of the group became officially engaged with the musical *Hair* in Munich. Those musicians later stayed in the West as emigrants. The rest of the musicians remained at home and formed new groups such as Blue Effect⁶.

**New songs by The Matadors**

How did the group reach the creation of their own music and lyrics? The band adopted the rhythm & blues style through the cover versions they copied. Members of the group exchanged a tape recorder with their favourite recordings and learned their parts individually. Then they rehearsed together. The distinction from the situation in the West, typical for all communist countries, consisted of the unavailability of sources, and that was the starting point for their own repertoire, which resulted from need: because of the unclear and technically very bad copies of recordings on tapes, they had to put the finishing touches on foreign songs very often. Good quality recordings were not available. Musicians often worked with fragments of recordings they recorded from the broadcasts of foreign radio stations such as AFN Munich, Radio Free Europe or Radio Luxembourg, which usually didn’t play whole songs but only parts of them.

It was usual for beat groups from the non-English sphere to sing in English. The Matadors too considered English to be the proper language for rock music. On the other hand, we have to admit that the average level of knowledge of English was very poor in Czechoslovakia and in similar countries at that time. Sometimes the transcription of lyrics resembled something like a phone book. The English texts of Czech singers often didn’t make much sense. Despite this, groups including The Matadors wanted to write new songs of their own in English.

Compositions arose from fragments thanks to momentary ideas, for instance, a longer guitar solo or a compilation of more lesser-known fragments of melodies, which are extremely difficult to identify today. An English textbook for children helped them in completing their first lyrics. Musicians found several short nursery rhymes, singsongs for children, and adapted them for rock and roll. The first of the songs that took its name from an English nursery rhyme was “Sing a song of sixpence”. Such a creative completion of foreign material led to the process of composing whole new songs. As examples we can choose three songs from various periods and by various authors⁷.

**“Old Mother Hubbard”**

One of the first original songs by The Matadors was called “Old mother Hubbard”. The music was written by singer Vladimír Mišík. The song had an extremely simple form. No refrain, no twelve-bar blues scheme, just a two-piece form, with a shorter second piece that nonetheless had a very long coda, offering enough time for improvisations.
There is a big melodic bass guitar part and similarly a very moving guitar part in the musical arrangement. The drums also play at extra quick time. The discreet organ connects the sound in between and the harmonica serves just as decoration.

Jan Farmer (Jan Obermayer) took quite a funny approach to creating, or adapting, the lyrics. The musician found a very old story about Mrs. Hubbard, again in an English textbook for children. Nobody from the group knew how old the rhymes were or what their origin was.

The rhyme was first published in 1805 as “The comic adventures of old mother Hubbard and her dog” (Wikipedia n.d.a). Sarah Catherine Martin (1768–1826) had written it on the basis of older sources. The topic probably came from the 16th century, from the era of Henry VIII. Some explanations refer to analogies with his divorce process.

After choosing the story, the adaptor of the lyrics had no idea of the historical connections. He just omitted some parts of the text and chose certain lines, which he then adapted to the electric blues rock character of the music. The Czech adaptor had to exclude the oldest parts of the poem in particular, because of the different rhythmical timing of the music. So the result, which combines different parts of the poem, had no real sense of sequences or relationship between them. But for Czech listeners and audiences of the second half of the 1960s, it was interesting. Electric blues rock and nonsensical, absurd images of some old lady and her dog fit together quite well in the end.

“OLD MOTHER HUBBARD” (“STARÁ MATKA HUBBARDOVÁ”)
Music: Vladimír Mišík. Lyrics: Jan Farmer

Four three two one....

She went to the baker’s to buy him some bread
When she came back, the poor dog was dead
She went to the joiner’s to buy him a coffin
When she came back, the dog was a-laughing

She went to the out-house to get him some beer
When she came back, the dog sat in a chair
She got every other, the dog didn’t mind
Tonight he slept, but later he just lied.

The dog lied, the dog lied, the dog lied...

THE CASE OF THE HATRED AND THE HATTER
The new songs by the keyboard player Jan “Farmer” Obermayer were more complicated in terms of harmony compared to those of Mišík. Songs include modulations and double voices which originated in his training and practice as a chorister.
Obermayer sang the second voice in all the other songs. Many of his own songs are written in a minor key with a modulation to parallel major keys.

Lyrics of the next song I analyse were in a Czech version as well as an English version: Czech lyrics “Zlatý důl” (which means “gold mine”) and the English version “Hate everything except of hatter”.

The song begins with pessimistic descending bass notes, which return again later, and then the sequence of chords A minor / C major / D minor / F major which brings contrast. Jan Obermayer loved to use heavy vibrato on his organ. It was a kind of fascination with the possibilities of the new instruments of that time, and was also a part of the Czech interpretation of blues and soul expression. The vocal expression of the singer Viktor Sodoma was also full of vibrato (see Example 1).

Again, the title of the song expresses the musicians’ hopelessness with English. The English title of the EP record was *Hate everything except of hatter* - the use of the word “hatter” was really unwanted nonsense. Then they published a new recording of the song on the LP as “Hate everything except of hattered”. It sounded a little bit better but it was still grammatically wrong. The authors probably wanted to make a paraphrase of Bob Dylan’s quote “Don’t hate nothing at all, except hatred” from the song “It’s alright, ma (I’m only bleeding)”, so the right version of the title should be: “Hate nothing except for hatred”. Ultimately, Czech fans didn’t care about the correctness of the English and just enjoyed the feeling and atmosphere of the song.

“GET DOWN FROM THE TREE”

The third compositional model of The Matadors in the late 1960s involved the guitarist Radim Hladík and the new singer as of 1967, Viktor Sodoma, who created songs together. The guitarist usually started the guitar riff and the singer completed the singing melody, which is rhythmically structured according to the riff. Tension and gradation is achieved by the blues character of the harmony, and through repetitions with crescendos and an acceleration of the movement.

The formal structure is built rather intuitively, without heeding familiar models. The consistency is achieved by the repetition of various interludes derived from the initial riffs. In the same way, the song was finalised with improvisations from all the members of the group.

The lyrics were developed with the assistance of Helena Becková, who was a friend of the group who knew better English. They involve a play with simple rhymes (“tree – three”, “guy – by”, “heart – apart”, “me – see”, “wild – child”) as a series of challenges to lost love in order to retrieve it. The main phrase, which is the title of the song, sounds sharply rhythmical on the basis of the guitar riffs and melodic frame (see Example 2).

**CONCLUSION**

The group was active for a very short time. Czechoslovak audiences could only enjoy the group from 1966 to 1968. They started with the standard rock beat and
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developed a rhythm & blues repertoire derived from their favourite British groups. They imitated and copied British rhythm & blues music without knowing the original black American blues. Gradually they reached a kind of style of their own, with their own new songs written in English. Their creation was rather intuitive than thoroughly contemplated.

Despite the many limitations and difficulties of independent culture in a communist country, The Matadors became real stars and legends of the late 1960s in Czechoslovakia. Among them there were other rhythm & blues groups like Framus Five, Komey, Flamengo, and later on Blue Effect, but The Matadors were the leading group of the time. Bass player Otto Bezloja, who unfortunately died in 2001 in Munich, was a leader with great vision. He also defined the look of the group. That image did not only consist of long hair and jeans and other features familiar to the hippie movement, there were also new phenomena for the late 1960s, like dressing in old military (hussar’s) uniforms, women’s clothing, the bisexual look and other obscure features.

The group didn’t have a chance to enjoy excellent studio work. In addition, they had no idea how, for instance, the Small Faces worked in the studio. They copied their recordings and tried to recreate the same sound on stage. The original songs of The Matadors can be characterized as a result of a combination of the British rhythm & blues style with features of other rock and pop music, including some domestic influences like popular songs of the time.
Example 1. The published score of the song “Hate everything except of hatter” / “Zlatý důl” (The Matadors 1968a).

**zlatý důl**

_HATE EVERYTHING EXCEPT OF HATTER_

**MUDBA Jan Obermajer**  **SLOVA Milan Sade

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Opekars: The Matadors

far-a-way
You're de-ten tak-kin' bout noth-ing

I can't stand you crazy laugh-ing girls, you're sel-fish you're sligh-gy

ba-ad
Girl you are a won-der-ful

na-ture's work with an-gels pace and de-vil's soul with no brains.
Example 2. The published score of the song “Get down from the tree” / “Slez dolů ze stromu” (The Matadors 1968a).

slez dolů se stromu
GET DOWN FROM THE TREE

HUBKA A SLOVA Radim Hladík a Viktor Sedomá

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**Endnotes**

1. This paper was initially presented at IASPM 15th Biennial Conference *Popular Music Worlds, Popular Music Histories* (Liverpool, 13-17 July 2009).
2. See the monograph about the group The Matadors, Opekar 2007. The book also includes a CD with previously unreleased recordings from the stage from June 1966, and several other archive sounds and also image material.
4. Besides the monograph in Czech (Opekar 2007) there are some web pages in English like *Wikipedia* n.d.b, *Eastrock* n.d., information on Jan Obermayer’s official web page (Obermayer n.d.); there is also a German page (*Ostbeat* n.d.).
5. Among the songs covered in 1965-66 were: “Where have all the good times gone”, “It’s too late”, “Milk cow blues” (The Kinks); “My generation”, “I can’t explain” (The Who); “I’m a man, I’m not talking” (The Yardbirds); “Don’t bring me down”, “Mama keep your big mouth shut” (The Pretty Things); “Keep on running” (The Spencer Davis Group). This style has been completed by pieces like “Good bye my love” or “Farmer John” by the Searchers and similar softer groups.
6. The Blue Effect was a rock group established in 1968 by the guitarist Radim Hladík. The group is still active in 2012 and has produced a sideshow “Matadors Memory” since 2005. The tribute project “Matadors Memory” comprises of former members of the Matadors such as Viktor Sodoma and Jan Obermayer.
7. All analyzed songs are available on the CDs: Bonton Music 1995, Supraphon 2010 and recently Munster Records 2011. There are also extracts available on YouTube: “Old mother Hubbard” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANnYmF23F4c>; accessed 30.jan.12); “Hate everything except of hatter” / “Zlatý důl” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l5IQyq39GPk>; accessed: 30.jan.12); “Get down from the tree” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3phQ_JeqG5w>; accessed:30.jan.12).
8. The bass player Otto Bezloja was a leading personality of the group and the guitarist Radim Hladík is among the most appreciated guitarists of Czechoslovak rock music.
9. The transcription by Aleš Opekar according to the sound recording. See also Opekar 2007, pp. 154-155.

**References**


Score.


