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Post-Velvet Jazz Baby

Jack Elkin

Czech Republic: Arts and Social Change

Spring 2005

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Abstract: Throughout the past fifty years, two principle agents have inhibited experimentation in Prague's jazz scene, totalitarian states and the conditions that followed after the fervor of the Velvet Revolution died out. What has resulted is an environment that has embraced variation but not typically new or contemporary ideas, which is only just beginning to change.

I. Introduction

Jazz exists in nearly every major city as an established part of the culture and entertainment industry, and Prague is no exception to this. However at the same time, jazz does not appear to draw much popular interest and in many ways seems to be viewed as an art that is so abstract that it can only be understood by those that are “cultured;” in other words it has attained the status of the “new classical” music. However, things used to be different: one can listen to live Charlie Parker recordings from the 1950's and hear extatic hooting and hollering in the background. While there are certainly those individuals that are equally as moved by the music nowadays, his music seems to most commonly be used now to set the background mood at posh hotels, and once again Prague is no exception to this. Thus the question must be asked: Is jazz still a medium of art that is undergoing an evolution, and if so, what places is this specifically happening. If it is not happening, what are the reasons behind this? Jazz is readily available in Prague and the city additionally seems to have an established heritage of music, so it seemed like a natural place to pursue this question, and my findings are thus: jazz in Prague has not for the most part changed since the 1980's, and experimentation and growth in the genre of jazz is only just beginning to happen here. Throughout the past fifty years, two principle agents have inhibited experimentation in Prague's jazz scene, totalitarian states and the conditions that followed after the fervor of the Velvet Revolution died out. What has resulted is an environment that has embraced variation but not typically new or contemporary ideas, which is only just beginning to change.

II. Pre-Velvet Jazz

While it is subject to debate when the first jazz music arrived in Czechoslovakia, jazz as a genre became part of the country's everyday life at some indefinite point in time in the 1920's through the big bands and “hot jazz” of R.A. Dvorský and Jaroslav Ježek. The rapid

arrival of this American art form into the country says a lot about where the culture was in the 1920's. The first Czechoslovak Republic was an economically powerful democracy with an educated citizenry and a cosmopolitan character, which was reflected in the internationalist and avant-garde character of the country's most contemporary art movement, the Devětsil (Matzner, 2). This first incarnation of jazz harmonized well with Prague's cultural scene primarily for two reasons: one was that it transformed the central European paradigm for dance by liberating Czechs from the rigid movements of traditional Hapsburg waltzing through such jittering styles as the foxtrot and the shimmy. One member of the Devětsil, Ctibor Haluza, even went on to postulate: "Such a foxtrot is a means of communication between all peoples," (Matzner, 3). Additionally, the very fact of its black origins played quite certainly a decisive role in the generally proclaimed efforts to establish a new proletarian culture and art (Matzner, 2). Jazz additionally was adopted for use by the performance arts like film and theater. In the first book on jazz, aptly entitled *Jazz*, written and published by Devětsil member E.F. Burian (an important name in Czech theater history) in 1928, the opening paragraph is thus: "We are on the verge of a new era. The contrivances of past eras have been used up...we are searching for new means of expression. New techniques are based on new discoveries...a revolution in notes has begun and is in its most active phase," (Burian, 9). Thus jazz during Czechoslovakia's inter-war period had political undertones, because like surrealism, it was held by Marxists to be an important part of the new liberated and egalitarian society that was to come in the future.

Until the post-Velvet Revolution period, this first phase in the development of jazz was the last time that the genre was not subject to at least marginal restriction by the state, whether it be Nazi or Communist. In describing why the totalitarian regimes that inhabited Czechoslovakia in the twentieth century restricted the art form, Josef Škvorecký writes: "the totalitarian ideologists loath art, the product of a yearning for life, because that too evades their control-if controlled and legislated, it perishes," (Škvorecký, 84). However, to in fact

choke an art form to the brink of its existence is an incredibly difficult task; iron clad legislation was released during the Nazi occupation, but jazz was far from extinct. Under Nazism, jazz was restricted because of its “Ameican-Judeo-Negroid” origins. After the takeover of Czechoslovak regions by German troops in 1938, Josef Goebbels responded to an inquiry on whether jazz was to be broadcasted on Third Reich radio as thus:

If by jazz we mean music that is based on rhythm and entirely ignores or even shows contempt for melody, music in which rhythm is indicated primarily by ugly sounds of instruments so insulting to the soul, why then we can only reply to that question entirely in the negative. (Škvorecky, 84)

At the same time, the Nazis failed to jam the jazz programs that emitted from Radio Stockholm throughout the entirety of World War II. This was allowed to happen, because Sweden was neutral country with an “Aryan heritage.” Swedish films also provided jazz for Czechs during World War II (Škvorecky, 89). If jazz was to be presented in public under Nazi occupation, it had to be purged of its more offensive qualities. Škvorecky describes how at one point there was even regulations governing how musicians could play. For instance: “Rule 4: So-called jazz compositions may contain at most 10% syncopation; the remainder must consist of a natural legato movement devoid of the characteristics of the barbarian races (so-called riffs),” (Škvorecky, 86). The Nazis at the same time tried counteracting the younger musical genre by promoting “deutsche tanzmusik,” the more classic style of Central European music, polka. However, once again things occasionally slipped through the cracks. At one point in his book, *Talkin’ Moscow Blues*, Škvorecky describes how he would trade jazz sheet music with Nazi soldiers, and how they would often frequent the very clubs that Goebbels had intended them to restrict, (88). As far as music criticism goes, widespread publication in the form of historical texts and magazines was practically non-existent, (Matzner, 9). However, underground publications that discussed jazz did exist. One was *Okružní Korespondence (OK)*, which was often distributed and read in taverns in remote villages where underground concerts had a better chance of slipping by the attention of Nazi soldiers. If the German police were spotted in the distance by the person who would serve as

look out on that particular evening, the publications would be hidden, people would separate and plant themselves on bar stools, and the band would ease into a Viennese waltz. Once the police had left, “everyone jumped up again, the Kansas riffs exploded, and it was swing time once again,” (Škvorecky, 91). Jazz even existed at moments in concentration camps; Emil Ludvík and Ghetto Swingers were permitted to play during the week that the Terezín ghetto was being inspected by members of the Swedish Red Cross (however, this can be seen as nothing more than a deliberate maneuver by Nazi officials to present the humane character of their inhumane actions), (Truhlár, 1). Jazz was certainly restricted during World War II, but because it was a popular movement and had become ingrained in the culture, it outlasted the external controls of Nazi ideology.

The window of freedom that followed 1945 however only lasted for three short years and soon the Czechoslovakian jazz scene found itself under the thumb of a new totalitarian government that was influenced from afar this time by Soviet Russia. Communist ideology was vexed by jazz because they found it to be “perverted and decadent music invented by capitalists to deafen the ears of the Marshallized world by means of epileptic, loud-mouth compositions,” (Škvorecky, 91). It was practically only fifteen years prior that marxist-minded Czechs had dished out their praise of jazz for its spontaneous, new and experimental elements, and now these qualities were at odds with the “ideology.” In effort to transform this popular movement so it could be incorporated into the state’s ideology, the communists created their own “official” model jazz band, which made such absurd maneuvers as purging hybrid-sounding (therefore bourgeois) instruments like saxophones for non hybrid (therefore more international and proletarian sounding) like violoncello, (Škvorecky, 94). It also does not take a musicologist to figure out that the saxophone is a much louder, youthful, and aggressive instrument (therefore more threatening).

The expressiveness and vigor of big band swing music was easy for the communists to debunk and antagonize as decadent and bourgeois. However, the revival of Dixieland music

in the mid-1950's became a greater ideological problem. "This was a type of cannibal music with roots so patently folkloristic and often (the blues) so downright proletarian that even the most Orwellian falsifier of facts would be hard to deny them," (Škvorecky, 94). Thus throughout the fifties the state not only permitted Dixieland music but incorporated it into the communist context. Bohemian groups with Bayou names became plentiful (the Czechoslovak Washboard Beaters, the Prague City Stompers, etc.), "and at the same time you could see Dixieland played at youth entertainment functions with girls in pseudo-national costumes yodelling bombastic odes to Stalin," (Škvorecky, 94). In spite of this, one very interesting about Dixieland music is that, unlike more modern types of jazz, its instrumentation and composition is not terribly complex, and thus comparatively easy to pick up with some practice. "When I began playing Dixieland in the early sixties, there were a lot of people just picking up the music, because it was fun. You would just look over your shoulder at what the other guy was doing, and move forward from there," (Ernyei, 5/2/05). While the genre of jazz that this generation was playing is quite old, the fashion that these youths approached it with was nonetheless spontaneous, in spite of the regime.

However, this repression of course occurred because before the late 1950's, jazz was a popular music movement. However, with the evolution of bebop music into the more abstract form of modern bop and the emergence of the louder and wilder genre of rock and roll, jazz began to lose the ability that popular music has, which is to galvanize the masses. The result of this was that the communists began to take less interest in regulating the genre. This combined with the death of Stalin and the fact that Eastern Europe had undergone a cultural thaw since the mid-1950's soon led to the emergence of various types of jazz in 1960's Czechoslovakia. "The sixties were a time of government-sponsored international jazz festivals," (Škvorecky, 96). Andrej Ernyei expands: "All the biggest names in jazz were here: Roland Kirk, Sonny Rollins, Bill Evans, Clifford Brown, Don Cherry, you name it, they were here," (4/09/05). Long time jazz journalist Vladimir Kouřil adds: "Musicians could travel to

different parts of Europe, and this opened up the possibility to share new ideas,” (4/13/05). There was, however, a limit to this: Jana Koubková told the story of when Ella Fitzgerald visited Prague in the early sixties, and was so deeply impressed with one young singer that she saw, Eva Olmerová (one of Koubková’s greatest heroes), that she invited the girl to come on tour with her. The communists however refused to permit this, and Eva watched the possibility of performing to large crowds internationally go sliding down the tubes, (4/19/05). Nonetheless, the conditions were looser and more conducive to experimentation than they had been; for more types of jazz were available to the masses to play and listen to, and it was in this period that the closest thing to a Czech avant-garde in jazz developed.

Maybe the best album of all time in Czech jazz is Jiří Stivín’s “s Ran do Čepice” from 1969. It’s an extremely impressive free jazz album, and it is the result of being able to travel around Europe. One of the musicians on this album is Polish. When you listen, you understand how free the music was. The Russians had come, but normalization did not begin until 1971. Musicians are only now beginning to reach this level again. (Kouřil, 4/13/05).

While it is fairly easy to find any of Jiří Stivín’s albums from the past fifteen years, this album could not be found. Either this means that the album is more prolific to Vladimír than other Czechs, or that Czech jazz history from the experimental 1960’s is not made readily available, which is probably more the case. Albums from Karl Velebny’s group SHQ are not easy to find in the city, which is ironic considering Velebny’s important role in Czech jazz during communism (Pasmík, 4/18/05). To trace the albums in Velebny’s career is to witness that the narrative of Czech jazz from the early 1960’s to the late 1980’s. His first group from the early sixties, Studio 5, was full of talent but their sound was a bit too traditional, and sounds tacky when comparing it with what was happening in hard bop in the United States in the same time period. However, once these hard bop artists made their way overseas, things began to change. One recording of Velebny’s band collaborating with saxophonist Archie Shepp from 1963 reveals this climb in sophistication of the music. Studio 5 already is playing harder and with more soul; there is an undefinable fervor on the album. By 1969, Velebny has organized a

different band SHQ, who in the late sixties were playing an unrestrained avant-garde form of free jazz that bares similarity to American saxophonist Eric Dolphy in there wild contrasting of vibes and contrabass, but they have still achieved their own sound. The album ESP was actually successfully enough amongst the jazz circles of its time to be distributed in the United States, a rare feat in Czech Music. However, as Normalization ensues, the music slowly becomes less experimental. SHQ's music does pick up on the contemporary trends of fusion in the seventies, thus experimenting with those sounds, however the music at the same time becomes less expressive: they begin to fall back on signature hooks, and the soloing becomes less interesting. While the work of artists often experience some form of decline as they age, the fact that SHQ's post-1970 albums are government censored should not be forgotten. By the mid-eighties, it becomes evident that these conditions have completely quelled much of what was interesting about Velebny's group, and that his career is coming to a close.

However, unlike Velebny, many of the important people in the Czech jazz scene of the 1960's did not experience this environment and went into exile after 1968. This did not create a lag in Czech jazz musicians though: "This is when jazz fusion arrived in Czechoslovakia which meant that there was a whole new generation of musicians from different backgrounds playing a whole new style of jazz," (Kouřil, 4/13/05). Communists did not know what to make of this new phenomenon; because there were genres of music that they considered to be more dangerous than this new fusion, the latest incarnation of jazz suffered only partial repression. "Jazz fusion was only third on the list of music that the communists restricted; next was rock, and what you absolutely could find no where was lyrical folk music, like Bob Dylan," (Mojžíš, 4/16/05). An unintended result of this was that many rock musicians crossed over to this rock-influenced form of jazz because there was more opportunity to play it. "There would be jazz fusion festivals in Prague every year in places like Lucerna," (Mojžíš, 4/16/05). Jana Koubková organized the Vokalíza Music

Festival in 1982, which gave Czechs an opportunity to see both blues and jazz, and enormous numbers of spectators would turn up. “It would give people a chance to actually see and hear this music, it was great, even though it was censored by the communists,” (Koubková, 4/19/05). Jarda Pasmik adds: “I think communists liked putting on these festivals because they thought it showed off their openness to the rest of the world,” (4/18/05). Thus presents the primary dilemma of Czech jazz in the 1970’s and 80’s, jazz music was available in public, but always under the thumb of state, for the state did not mind jazz as long as it could control it, like everything else in the country. Thus the result of this partial stunting was that jazz could exist but the freedom required for experimentation had to be left out of the picture.

Jazz was only permitted to be played at state-run jazz festivals and the two state-owned clubs, one of them being Reduta, which still exists today on Narodni Trida. “At these two clubs, all of the musicians were paid the same wage, and the music was censored, so generally, second-rate,” (Pasmik, 7). American artists were not typically allowed to tour Czechoslovakia. Only towards communism’s final days were major artists and groups allowed to enter the country, at which they would be met immediately by Czech fans with open arms. One recording of Chick Corea’s Electric Band performing in Prague in 1988 reveals this. The music is by no means Corea’s best work, but nonetheless, every song is followed by the boisterous applause of Czech spectators, so excited they were to have one of the giants of jazz fusion in their home city. Recorded music by artists like Corea or anyone else Western had been strictly unavailable before 1989. If jazz albums were to be found in Czechoslovakia, they either existed in private community collections that were kept secret from the authorities or at underground markets that could be found in the outskirts of Prague. These of course, experienced violent visits from the police on a fairly frequent basis (Kouřil, 4/13/05). The records would be smuggled into the country, and then often copied individually by using a magnetophone. Naj Ponk explains: “My father built up a fairly large collection by making connections at the American embassy. He would smuggle albums home

in secret and then copy them,” (4/26/05). There was not that much Czech jazz in circulation either, for albums were recorded rather sparingly; the only label who could make recordings was the communist run *Panton*. Since this label was state-run, funding dropped when the economy would lag. Jazz was additionally by no means encouraged: only four or five albums were recorded per year, and of course they were censored (Pasmik, 3-4)

It got to be a real competition between musicians every year for who would get picked to record an album, sometimes that made it fun. However, the big problem was that for the twenty years of normalization, all you have is something like one hundred albums. So much great music was never recorded. (Svoboda, 4/26/05)

Since there was not that much music available, it was extremely hard for Czechs to get a sense of jazz tradition. There was of course no standard form of schooling in jazz, thus education happened in what was referred to as the “living room conservatory” (Pasmik, 4/18/05). The result of this was that many musicians developed their own individual style; this could have been very fertile ground for experimentation, but it was in the context of playing in a manner that the authorities could accept. “It sounded kind of like a weird fusion between polka and jazz. Today’s younger musicians refer to it as Čezz. I think many people were in their own way trying to sound like Herbie Hancock. It did not really work,” (Pasmik, 4/18/05). The state-allowed Czech Jazz Society in 1984 increased education possibilities by starting summer jazz workshops. These activities were still censored, but the members of the CJS were not dissidents, they simply wanted to play their music (Pasmik, 1-2). The only manner in which jazz music coincided with the dissident movement was through the writings of the Jazz Section. The name is a deceptive one: the section was started by jazz fans and journalists in the mid 1970’s as a state-sponsored organization to promote jazz and organize festivals (like Prague Jazz Days), however as time passed the Section became more interested in rock music (Škvorecky, 117). As former Jazz Section member Vladimír Kouřil explains: “Jazz had lost in power of protest. It was not as interesting and lively to the Section,” (4/13/05). Josef Škvorecky adds: “This is why dissident leader Václav Havel was not a jazz fan but a rock fan,” (119). It was not as lively because the communists were sucking it of its

spontaneity and experimental qualities. Alas, then came the Velvet Revolution, and an end to the last political inhibitor of jazz experimentation. With the establishing of the new Czech Republic, jazz has since experienced new opportunities and challenges at being a free experimental art form.

III. Post-Velvet Changes and Conditions

The current state of jazz in Prague is open to much debate. In this case it really is a question of quantity versus quality: the jazz here in comparison to other cities seems to be relatively easy to find. “There are very few places that have such a strong concentration of jazz musicians,” (Svoboda, 4/26/05). However, for numerous reasons, the jazz scene that has developed here in Prague since 1989 is a fairly conservative one that is only just starting to embrace experimentation, and this is the result of the city’s conservatory, jazz clubs, record companies, radio stations, journalism and culture criticism, and civic organizations.

Jazz conservatory in Prague is a fairly new phenomenon. There are four levels in the schooling for Czech musicians (basic school, high school, conservatory, and academy). The major music academy HAMU does not provide a jazz program, and there is almost no jazz education in the lower public schools, which means that musicians can only receive jazz schooling in the middle stage at conservatory. In other words, academically jazz is not considered a high art here. This lag in education is also a layover from communism: jazz was not encouraged in the public forum, thus it was not incorporated into public education, (Pasmík, 2-3). Out of the twelve conservatories in the Czech Republic only one teaches jazz, Jaroslav Ježek Konservatoř, and their program is only two years old (though it’s rather peculiar that a conservatory named after a big band composer has a program for teaching classical music to the blind that predates its standard jazz education). Additionally, “since most of the jazz clubs are in Prague, there is less reasons for the other schools to have programs,” (Houbek, 4/18/05). Even the program in itself does not surmount to that much timewise: “Classes are altogether only last three hours a week,” (Houbek, 4/18/05). This is

dwarfed by American conservatory requirements, which often are too much for a student to graduate in four years.

Regardless of class time, the new possibility to study at conservatory, whether local or international has transformed the character of jazz musicians in the Czech Republic. As opposed to the musicians that predate the Velvet Revolution, these younger musicians are more properly schooled in tradition, but as a result tend to be more conservative and mainstream, and thus there has been an increased amount of homogeneity in Prague's pool of young talent. "Conservatories give you a basic knowledge of music. All you really take is harmony, composition, tonation and history. They don't really give you credit for independent projects even though every student has at least three," remarked Jarda Houbek, a piano player studying in his second year at Jaroslav Ježek, (4/18/05). However, composition professor Milan Svoboda responds: "The younger generation of musicians is lazy. Very few times in class do I get a musician who wants to do something new. Its like they are waiting for someone to help and give them a big break," (4/26/05). There is certainly a grain of truth in this. Jarda admits that very few students at the school are interested in any form of contemporary jazz. Jarda himself seems to be a fairly conservative musician: he enjoys big band and bebop, and his biggest influences are piano players like Duke Ellington and Art Tatum. In other words, Jarda wants to play the music of the fifties. Andrej Ernyei, who played the music of the fifties when it was fresh questions the feeling that conservatory students play these old tunes with: "When I was that age we kind of just picked up our instruments and played those tunes out of nowhere, and now they teach these kids how to bang out Charlie Mingus chords, but it does not seem natural," (4/9/05). Jarda agrees: "there a lot of students here who just play what they are taught, and they all play the same," (4/18/05). The one senior recital that I attended was for the most part pretty boring; it was a sextet (piano, bass, drums, saxophone, trumpet, and trombone) that performed eight songs to a crowd of students, teachers and parents one afternoon in the Agharta Jazz Club. There was clearly talent in the

group, especially with the bassist and the saxophonist, which made the performance engaging in the beginning. However, it was for the most part much the same as the five hundred Blue Note recordings that I have already heard. The performance just seemed to grow gradually less interesting to me, especially when they topped off the ending with worn out Coltrane, Monk, and Parker standards done in a fusion style that has not changed for twenty-five years. There were no original compositions performed that day, which does not necessarily need to be the paradigm. In the United States, it is not out of the norm for college musicians to perform their own original works at senior recitals.

While the school intends for its students to graduate in four years, many stay for six. “It’s easy to get lazy here. There are a lot of people who don’t have any direction,” (Houbek, 4/18/05). There are ones with direction however, and that direction appears to lead them outside of the country. The Prague scene does not seem to be good for young musicians because there are too many players and too few gigs, which generally pay very poorly. Milan Svoboda explains this overpopulation: “Not only can you go abroad, but now foreign musicians were free to come to Prague also. This was a negative effect of this new freedom, because now there is too many musicians, and not enough places to play,” (4/26/05). Jarda adds: “To be a successful jazz musician here you also have to teach, and there are really only fifty or so jobs in this city,” (4/18/05). Combined with the fact that not many Czechs want to see jazz, the best tend to leave the country for other cities in Western Europe that provide better scenes, and better paying gigs. Often, good musicians leave Jaroslav Ježek before they have graduated, move to a western city, continue their studies there, and try to land some of the better paying gigs, (Jarda, 4/18/05). Jarda adds: “I have one friend who left early and now plays in London. He’s making more money than he would here and he is meeting a lot of really good musicians. I want to try it out in London too, my English is pretty good,” (4/18/05). Quite often the feeling of the teachers is mutual: “I tell them ‘go abroad!’ One must go abroad to do something truly innovative,” (Svoboda, 4/26/05). However, while many local

musicians make an effort to go abroad, they often don't succeed at it. Guitarist David Dorůžka infers: "I think what playing abroad means for musicians from Prague is doing wedding gigs in Germany," (4/23/05). Nonetheless, with many of the most talented and ambitious Czech musicians seeking to leave the country, fresh ideas are kept circulating throughout the scene, which in effect makes the environment more conservative and worse for experimentation.

The clubs for the most part have not helped to remedy the situation in respect to this. Jazz is still performed everynight, in a variety of places in Prague, which is not the case in every European city. "There are a lot of clubs here. Berlin is much bigger, but only has two clubs in the entire city," (Zitko, 4/29/05). However, with some exceptions, Czech clubs play a fairly conservative blend of jazz, and this is because they are for the most part, fairly dependent on the tourist industry here. Before 1989, there were only two clubs; by 1991, there were eighteen. This was the result of a large influx of tourist money, and the Velvet Revolution enthusiasm of Czech jazz fans and musicians. With the post-1989 enthusiasm came an environment that was more conducive to experimentation. "You could actually find free jazz here," (Pasmík, 4/18/05). However, one third of the post-1989 clubs did not last a year, and today only six of those clubs exist (Agharta, U Staré Paní, U Maleho Glena, Porfavore, Reduta, and Acropolis). One of the reasons is that many clubs could not withstand the rise of property costs after the influx of tourist money. Additionally, the number of native Czech clientele for the venues dwindled as time began to distance itself from the Velvet Revolution (Pasmík, 7-8). Let us focus specifically on Agharta and U Staré Paní. Michal Hejna, the owner of the Agharta Jazz Club and drummer in Jiří Stivín's quartet explains: "When our old location was first opened, it was about fifty percent Americans and fifty percent Czechs. Now it is only about ten percent Czechs. I think that people find that the prices are too expensive and that the schedule is too redundant," (4/20/05). Piano player Naj Ponk adds: "the names aren't redundant for tourists, and the prices are nothing, especially if they are British," (4/26/05).

The reason why these six clubs have fended off extinction so far is because they have adapted to the fact that they rely on tourist money. Jakub Dostal, the owner of U Staré Paní, explains: “If we did not try to get tourists here, we would last maybe two weeks,” (4/24/05). Firstly, the jazz that is played in these clubs is deliberately digestible for the tourist’s music palate, this means almost no contemporary jazz but nearly all of the established forms of the genre: big band, bebop, hard bop, fusion, scat and bossa nova. “We want very good musicians, but we do not want anything strange or experimental. No experiments,” Dostal explains (4/24/05). Dostal’s venue does occasionally book more experimental acts like the young group Vertigo, but he expresses: “we hear that they are supposed to be good but we are not that excited to have them, because we know that we are going to lose money. There will be more Czech jazz fans and musicians than tourists, and that’s a problem,” (4/24/05). Hejna agreed that there was not much room in his club for anything “avant-garde,” but it isn’t because of the tourists. It is because fusion is his “cup of tea,” and Agharta is a fusion club, (4/20/05). However, it is rather easy to say that when most of your clientele range from age twenty-five to fifty, the generation that grew up with jazz fusion and names like Hancock, Corea, and Zawinul. Hejna says that he selects the monthly schedule for Agharta, but Vojtech the piano player from Vertigo says that this is a lie and that Hejna’s business partners put together a schedule that is marketable, (4/29/05). U Staré Paní is slightly better: they have Jana Koubková, the elder stateswoman of jazz in the Czech Republic, assemble what Jakub Dostal refers to as “the perfect schedule to represent his premier club,” (4/24/05). This does include many of the bigger names in the Czech jazz scene that are creating original music: “there are many artists that won’t play anywhere else but here,” Dostal adds (4/24/05). However all of the major clubs seem to have their alliances: Jiří Stivín, the biggest name in the current Czech jazz scene, tends to play much more at Agharta than the other clubs (the list could go on). The artists that these clubs book are definitely talented but few have new musical ideas to share, and that is not what the clubs are looking for. “They all book very

good conservative musicians, but that does not take away from the fact that they are conservative,” (Pasmík, 4/28/05). Since they follow this formula for success, the repertoire of artists that play these gigs doesn’t tend to change that much. All the same artists are performing in the same clubs, which seems mildly ridiculous due to the fact that there is an over-population of gigless musicians here. Nonetheless, this is the music that they must play in order to attract tourist money. One tradition that a few of these clubs, like U Maleho Glena, keep alive are the occasional monthly jam sessions in which random musicians are invited to come and play with other random musicians. The intention is to bring a lot different musicians together that would play with each otherwise. This is the perfect gesture for experimentation, however, not enough musicians took part in these events, and clubs like U Staré Paní had to discontinue them (Dostal, 4/24/05).

The clubs also gun for tourist money through how they present themselves aesthetically. Agharta presents itself as a mainstream American club in an exotic location: from the moment you enter into the club from Staroměstská, the viewer immediately sees the walls clad with pictures of the giants in modern American jazz: John Scofield, Stanley Clarke, Joe Zawinul, Pat Metheny, etc. What the viewer does not see is a single face or name from Czech jazz history, for that is not important. What is important is the Romanesque style walls and ceiling, which makes the experience all the more “exotic.” The vibe that Agharta is going for is American music in a fairy tale city; this could only be intended for tourists. U Staré Paní has more of the typical modern jazz club aesthetic that can be found in jazz clubs from Tokyo to Toronto, and that is the IKEA aesthetic (in fact much of the furnishings were purchased at IKEA). “We have a modern look for our modern jazz. Before we bought this place, it looked really weird, and nobody would come, definitely not tourists,” (Dostal, 4/24/05). U Staré Paní definitely is phenomenally chic, with candles lining the stairwell that leads to the basement where the music is played. This large room has a very sleek aesthetic of orange walls, black floors, and red lighting. It’s impossible for tourists to resist. What also helps is that every

publication that U Staré Paní produces is in English. “We used to publish schedules and menus in both English and Czech, but since so few Czechs were coming, we saw it as a unnecessary expense,” (Dostal, 4/24/05).

It must be noted however that both Dostal and Hejna are businessmen. Dostal studied at the University of Economics, and was not interested in jazz until six years ago. He has made a profession out of organizing music for tourists: he took part in organizing the kitschy classical music concerts that are played daily at the St. Nicholas Church in Staroměstské Naměstí and also “Jazzboat,” which is an opportunity for tourists to see traditional jazz along with Prague’s historical scenery as they float on down the Vltava (Dostal, 4/24/05). Hejna is a musician, but definitely behaves like a businessman. They are both primarily concerned with establishing the prestige of their clubs, and this is best achieved by appealing to the tourist industry; creating a good environment does not appear to fit into this equation.

There is however other venues for artists to perform aside from the major clubs, but these seem to be even less conducive for experimentation. There are always gigs in restaurants and hotels, but since the artist has been designated as background music, experimentation obviously becomes secondary to pleasing the international clientele. “This is becoming less popular though,” comments Jarda Pasmík, “owners now can just save money by throwing on a CD; and of course these jobs don’t pay well anyway,” (4/18/05). The best opportunities for experimentation in the Czech Republic seem to be at the local festivals run in towns like Brno and Plzen. Jakub Zitko, frontman of the multimedia orchestra group NUO explains: “We always get the best response to our newer type of music at festivals. They always get a lot of different types of music, and native Czechs come instead of tourists, and they are always more interested in what we play,” (4/29/05). If an artist has established themselves internationally, the possibility opens up to play the big international festivals in Europe and throughout the rest of the world. “I make most of my money from the five or six international festivals that I participate in every year,” comments scat singer Jana Koubková (4/19/05). What this means is

that many of these established artists that are circulating through the clubs do so simply as a hobby, because they can not make any real money from it. “The tendency is then for them to start to sort of get lazy, and not invest themselves that much in the performance. Most of these guys make money by doing other jobs,” ((Pasmík, 4/28/05).

There is not really any money in the local recording industry either. Nearly all of this nation’s jazz artists are on Czech labels, and small ones at that. The nation’s largest recording company *Bonton* takes no interest in jazz because it is clearly a periphery market. The result of this is that the Czech jazz albums are primarily released by three small companies: *Arta*, *P&J Music*, and *Cube & Metier*. *Arta* is owned by the same group that runs the Agharta Jazz Club, and by no surprise they approach recording music in the same manner that they run their club: they produce albums that correspond well with the mainstream American market, (Pasmík, 3-4). Miloš Dvořáček, the drummer for NUO, who recorded their first self-titled CD in *Arta*’s 2HP Studios comments: “we did not really like how they recorded our brass section that super clean fusion way,” (4/29/05). Once again, Mr. Hejna is a businessman. *P&J Music* specializes specifically in world music, in which jazz serves as one piece of the puzzle. Many of their artists are from the early nineties, and the music is thus fairly middle-aged. The group organizes concerts that bring artists from all around the world to the Czech Republic. It is hard to comment further on this company’s albums, because they have the poorest circulation. I could not find any.

Then there is Pavel Vlček’s label *Cube & Metier* whose focus is to provide the public with a survey of the jazz scene (Pasmík, 3-4). Vlček is a white-haired businessman in his sixties who owns electronics companies in both Britain and in the small Northern Bohemian town of Houben. He uses the money that he makes from these two companies to fund debatably the largest jazz label in the country, and he never expects to make a profit from this, it is simply his hobby. “The mission of this company is to localize jazz here and to simply have Czech artists on the shelves. Therein lies the victory,” (4/22/05). From a young age,

Vlček has been passionate about jazz, and at one point even played the trombone, though not very well. He left the country after 1968, but then returned twenty-five years later, and after establishing a successful business there, he decided to create a label that would sign artists who weren't being signed. The project expanded and now Vlček's albums have circulation in other European countries (Vlček, 4/22/05). His most successful artist is a Latino bossa nova singer named Yvonne Sanchez, "whose music is approachable because it has vocals and is less abstract, and she also corresponds well with the success of the Buena Vista Social Club," (Vlček, 4/22/05). However, Vlček is only concerned with the success of these albums, because it is the goal of his company to have one of their artists signed to a major record label, this would be a great success. They are not concerned with the market or competition with the other companies because there is not a really a market here. "People are not buying jazz albums, and if they are buying jazz albums, they are definitely not buying Czech jazz albums. A Czech artist can not compete in the world market. Forget about it," (Svoboda, 4/26/05). Pavel Vlček is a true jazz fan and his label exists for all the right reasons. It is true that his label at the moment is predominantly an older style of jazz, even when it is played by younger artists. However, this could possibly change: "we are always looking for younger artists with talent and new ideas," exclaims Vlček (4/22/05). If so, *Cube & Metier* plays a fairly important role in circulating new types of jazz, whether people are listening or not.

People are not listening to jazz on the radio either. Only two stations play jazz in the Czech Republic: Radio 2 and Radio 3. However only Radio 3 (Česky Rozhlas) plays jazz after the 1950's, which for the purposes of this study means that there is only one. Česky Rozhlas is a culture station that is comparable with National Public Radio in the United States. In other words, it is a government-funded institution, thereby it does not need to concern itself with the whim of popularity. Much like *Cube & Metier*, Česky Rozhlas provides jazz just so it is available. "It's good to put it out there so it is possible for people to approach it," comments Jazz and World Music manager Aleš Opekar (4/14/05). Česky

Rozhlas' highest ranked programs are the morning and evening news programs (which achieved a 30 and a 27 on the ratings scale). The traditional jazz that Český Rozhlas plays in the morning follows the news program (9:30-10:00 am) and benefits from this spot by posting a 25 rating. The Modern Jazz that is played in the early evening however has a significantly poorer rating of 15. As Aleš explains, this is partly because the way that people are listening to the radio is changing: "People are less likely nowadays to just sit down and listen closely. Jazz is a very abstract type of music, so it is hurt by this," (4/14/05). Additionally, as Opekar puts it, they are receiving less "traditional" listeners. What a program needs to be successful is two types of listeners: traditional and specialized. Traditional are more plentiful; they merely sit back and enjoy the music for what it is. By contrast, specialized listeners are inspired to discover more information about the song or artist and make contact with the disc jockey; the Modern Jazz Program at Český Rozhlas has much more of this second type. Thus they receive plenty of phone calls during the programs and e-mails from listeners (even sometimes ones from abroad), but paradoxically receive low ratings (Opeker, 4/14/05). When listening to the Modern Jazz program this comes as no surprise because the repertoire is fairly sophisticated. They play new material from Czech artists frequently, and often have these artists on the program. Since are part of an exchange with the rest of European Union, they play new artists from France, Spain, etc., and while they do play major American artists, it's never obvious mainstream material. In other words, it is a real and organic program that few people listen to.

Like *Cube & Metier*, the people who listen to the program are generally from an older generation, age thirty and above. "We are beginning to attract younger listeners though, especially if we play some type of fusion with electronica. Still, we generally don't attract younger listeners unless they are musicians," (Opeker, 4/14/05).

The city's journalists do not seem to place that much attention on jazz either. In the three months that I have been here, the major newspapers (Dnes, Lidové Noviny, and the Prague Post) have only covered one story relating to jazz, the Wayne Shorter concert in early

March. There is no doubt that in the world of jazz, Shorter's name is far more important than anyone Czech, and additionally his latest project is a fine achievement of experimental music, all the more impressive considering that he is seventy-one. Nonetheless, the lag in coverage of the Czech jazz scene reflects the disinterest of the journalistic towards its redundancy. "I just kind of lost interest with it five years ago. It's not very dynamic; we cover a jazz story maybe once or twice a year," comments Jarda Pasmík, journalist for *Respekt* (4/18/05).

IV. Contemporary Names

Nonetheless, these are nothing more than the aspects of the environment. One can not understand the nature of a country by merely studying its geography, and likewise one can not understand Prague's jazz scene and whether it embraces experimentation without observing the nature of the artists that inhabit this scene. The following section is a survey of important jazz musicians and how they are approaching experimentation in the year 2005.

Andrej Ernyei and The Preserved Tradition

Andrej Ernyei is of the most amicable personalities playing jazz in Prague today. He is a sixty year old contrabass, acoustic guitar, and banjo player involved in a variety of different groups, but he primarily runs his own company called *Ernyeiart*, that helps to organize arts and culture events around the city. This keeps Andrej very busy, so much of his time is spent as a coordinator rather than a musician. When I last met with him, he was scrambling around Smichov searching for a shop that would print him company stamps; he was rather strapped for time, he was to meet a horde of dancers who were to arrive at Prague's Marriot at eleven o' clock. With all this responsibility, it would seem that Andrej does not really have much time for his music, however he plays fairly often because his music has not changed that much since he was young. Andrej plays Dixieland and traditional jazz both for tourists and native Czechs; nearly the entirety of the music he plays are old standards. When I asked him why he didn't play originals, he exchanged a playful smirk: "The music I play was someone's original," (4/09/05). He had obviously already been asked that question before, and had

decided that it was a silly one. Ernyei plays music not out of a need to create anew, but rather because it is a tradition that keeps him happy. I realized this upon watching him strum the upright bass at a gig in Dobrá Trafiká (near Naměstí Míru). The old Bossa Nova tunes that he was playing he had obviously performed many times before. Nonetheless, his playing still possessed a sense of excitement, not to mention that he had a lot of soul. Andrej preserves this tradition because he honestly sees the beauty in it; he is currently collecting vintage items like statuettes of waiters in tuxedos so he can create a model 1930's jazz club in his basement. This appreciation for traditional jazz has continued with his daughter Petra, who sings beautifully in a quartet that plays strictly jazz before 1955. The jazz is tacky, but both the band and the audience were engaged with each other at her gigs, and everyone seems to be having fun, which is the point.

Aside from his weekly gig at the Prague Radisson, these are the type of places that Andrej plays: small and tucked away clubs outside the normal circuit. He additionally does not seem to have much interest in the scene or new developments in the genre: "I play good jazz. I'm not really interested in the newer types of jazz or fusion that people like Stivín [who he went to grade school with] are playing. The scene Prague has is what it deserves. I just question the conviction of some of these younger guys," (4/09/05). Ernyei may not be doing anything new or experimental, but at the same time that is not his concern; he does not see himself as "professional artist or musician," but rather is simply playing the music of his youth, because it helps to keep him young.

Jana Koubková and The Evolving Artist

Jana Koubková is the same age as Andrej Ernyei, but has had a much different career and is currently playing a much different type of jazz. Unlike Ernyei, Koubková's music continues to change, and at a rather quick pace at that; another difference is that she is still writing original work at the ripe age of sixty. However, she behaves by no means like a normal sixty year old: When I met with her, she arrived wearing hip blue sunglasses with a

hot maroon leather jacket that matched her fiery red hair, not the typical attire for a senior citizen. Much of this youthful vigor is the result of the fact that she is constantly active; there are few people who have had a more active role in Czech jazz over the past thirty years. She organized festivals in Prague during the communist era and brought jazz to a public which had marginal access to the art form, she organizes the music schedule for U Staré Paní, debatably Prague's biggest jazz club, and she often puts together programs for Radio 3, aside from her music. Additionally, her success as a woman in a male dominated genre is important for the future of Czech women in jazz, which is something that she is intensely passionate about. This public lifestyle combined with her super extroverted personality however has made Jana a bit of a self-promoter; it was rather difficult for her to answer questions without presenting me with new albums and pictures of her.

In the seventies she sang mainstream bebop but since then she has pretty much done everything that a scat singer can do: she sang with Africans, she sang with a Japanese girl in the 1980's, she sings free jazz in Germany (because there is no audience for it here), she sings for children in schools, etc. All of this reflects Jana Koubková's progressive spirit: she seemingly will go anywhere geographically and stylistically and do so with the utmost youth, which is quite impressive considering that she is sixty years old, even though she definitely does not look like it. In her latest project, the EU Band (the name in itself suggests a new phase), Koubková's supporting musicians all appear to be at least twenty years younger than her, and play with an almost violent amount of energy (I have never seen a bassist attack his strings the way hers does). This particular project is very impressive because of the edge and tenacity embodied in the music. However her playfully adventurous approach to music does not always yield necessarily a good product, what Jana possesses in energy, she lacks in taste. One example of this is the album that she recorded with a folk group in a cave: the musical recording is pretty well represented by its tacky cover, which shows Jana standing outside of the cave in a druid-like robe looking prophetically off into the distance. In short, she is very

capable of making really bad music, and while she certainly tries many different things and always appears to be having fun, none of her music conveys any sense of artistic vision, one thing that Jana Koubková lacks is soul. As active and publically-important as she is, it can't really be said that her music is experimental, because there is nothing that she is doing that is particularly new. She merely explores many different established styles (African, Bossa Nova, Free Jazz, etc.) and the result is a large catalogue of caricatures. Then again, it takes a truly special artist to make experimental music at age sixty.

Milan Svoboda and The Established Name

Milan Svoboda is a fixture in Prague's music scene; economically speaking he is as comfortable as a musician can be here. His name is tremendously established in the Czech Republic, he earns more money for his gigs than the majority of his colleagues in Prague, he is invited to play concerts abroad, he leads a successful big band orchestra, he releases one or two records a year, he has done a good deal of work in other mediums like theater, film, and classical music, he has his own slick bilingual website, he teaches at Jaroslav Ježek and holds the complete admiration of his students; in other words, he is sitting pretty. This was fairly evident the first time that I met with Milan: he was extremely cordial and relaxed, lounging in his black suit and fidora and smoking a big fat stogie. All throughout the meeting numerous friends and students approached him, shook his hand and conversation would ensue. This got to be irritating, because there was no end to his endless stream of socializing. He would often forget that I was conducting an interview.

His gig was the only one that sold out during my research period. The fact that it was Saturday night with sixty degree weather and tourists galore can not be ignored, but nonetheless, Milan had his devoted friends seated there in U Staré Paní cheering him on. Svoboda is simply a piano virtuoso, he has gorgeous technique and can vary the speed of his playing from swift to slow with the utmost grace. At the same time, his quartet plays the most repulsive form of tourist jazz imaginable, filled with sacrine-like sax hooks, accentuated by

their ever-smiling drummer. As talented as Svoboda is, one can't help but notice how bored he occasionally looks while performing. When it is considered how many times he has played those gigs in Prague to the same type clientele each time, it should come as no surprise. "Now I am living outside of Prague, I am 53, I do not feel that connected with the scene here anymore," (4/26/05). Svoboda got into jazz through his cousin Jiří Stivín, who is debatably the most established Czech artist of them all today. Jazz was especially important to Svoboda in the seventies, because musical improvisation was one of the only avenues of freedom during communist normalization, "especially because in my generation, all the most groundbreaking projects in fusion were coming from abroad," (Svoboda, 4/26/05). However, Svoboda adds: "If I had not grown up under communism, there is a good possibility that I would be performing classical music today," (4/26/05). Svoboda studied classical organ in the sixties at Prague Conservatory, and was self-taught in jazz (he is one of the infamous Čez artists). After communism fell in 1989, Svoboda's generation experienced a honeymoon period: they had outlasted their oppressors, and now they were rewarded with numerous invitations to play abroad (to Western European countries there was an exotic novelty to Eastern European musicians immediately after 1989). However, since then jazz has been depoliticized and a new form of normalization has set in. Svoboda's modern jazz catalogue has remained the same for the most part since the early 1980's, and while he certainly seems inclined to try new things (he is conducting a Beethoven symphony quite soon), it doesn't seem to be transforming his jazz music. "This is my fight. To constantly be finding new sounds, do things that have not been done before. I am starting a new quintet with a cello and viola, both these instruments are fairly new to jazz," (4/26/05). Time can only reveal how this project will turn out. Nonetheless, Milan Svoboda at the moment seems to be rather bored with his jazz, and instead of experimenting inside the medium, his interests are taking outside the genre. The result of this is that his jazz has not change for a long time.

Naj Ponk and The Blues Revival

Naj Ponk (Jan Knop) is very much a student of tradition. Many people in Prague credit him in restoring the knowledge of jazz tradition amongst the city's musicians, thereby spelling an end to the Čezz era. His knowledge was the result not only of his father's contacts in the American Embassy, but also the fact that he performed in the circus, which enabled him to travel to places like Poland where jazz was less heavily restricted. Thus the Knop family was able to build up a large private archive of American jazz records, from which Naj's career in jazz was able to sprout. "When I was thirteen, I first heard a recording by the Oscar Peterson Trio, and I knew that this is what I must do," (4/26/05). This is in fact exactly what he has done: Naj plays very much in the style of jazz from the late fifties and early sixties. There is not a trace of anything passed 1965 that can be found in his music. The thirty-two year old piano player explains: "Jazz is primarily about the blues and swing, and to play it well, one must know these two things. I don't really have much interest in that fusion stuff; it swings somehow, but not very well," (4/26/05).

If there is one thing that Naj Ponk's playing does embody, it is the blues and soul. His 1999 recording *Birds in Black* conveys this knowledge very well, but at the same time, his style is fairly indistinguishable from the giants that he idolizes, and the result is that the album begins to get very boring after the first two songs. *Birds in Black* was fairly popular amongst the city's jazz circles when it was first released, however since then the enthusiasm surrounding the piano player has dwindled. Naj is very conscious of this: "I am beginning to feel that my music is like a museum piece for people. There is not a lot happening in what I am doing. It's kind of depressing," (4/26/05). What is ironic is that Naj's current boredom has not altered his super-conservative approach to jazz. He described a festival that he had performed at recently, in which his trio was the only "real jazz" group there. "All the other guys were playing folk, ethno-music, afro-beat, electronica, but they should play at another event besides a jazz festival. This happening all over Europe, it's like there's no place for real jazz," (4/26/05). He added that experimentation in jazz was secondary to this knowledge of

what “real jazz” is based on. With this emphasis on historicism in his music, it should come as no surprise that Naj Ponk teaches jazz history at Jaroslav Ježek. Nonetheless, Naj Ponk’s interests are beginning to take him away from jazz: “I am thinking about starting a rock band that would be like AC/DC or Megadeth. It would be just straight-ahead rock. It must be a layover from my teenage years when I was listening to Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis,” (4/26/05). The jump from Oscar Peterson to Megadeth may seem like a drastic one, but it’s not for Naj Ponk. It is simply a traditional form of music from his childhood that he has yet to explore. Naj Ponk is debatably the artist that is least apt for experimentation in the Prague Jazz scene because he is so deeply embedded in historical genres. If it is not classic jazz, it is classic rock. He performs them as they have already been conceived, and any type of fusion or tinkering with the boundaries is completely out of the question.

David Dorůžka and The Conservatory Approach

Of all the young artists that have penetrated into the established Czech jazz scene, no one has had as much expectation bestowed on him as David Dorůžka. At least part of it has to do with his family name: his grandfather Lubomir has had an important role as a documentor of Czech jazz since World War II. Thus it can not be ignored that the twenty-five year old guitarist has been brought up with a strong musical background. Like most people from his generation, he was interested in rock, pop and blues before he made his way to jazz. He ended up as a jazz musician because he was “interested in more sophisticated music harmonically and rhythmically,” (4/23/05). Then at age seventeen, David earned a scholarship to Berklee College of Music in Boston. Berklee, often a temporary nest of uncertainty for American musicians, is lofty goal for young Czech players, because it gives them an opportunity to receive more types of learning as musicians than would be possible to receive in their native country. “I was able to experience playing in so many different contexts there: for example, I played with this one Spanish pianist Albert Saenz whose style challenged me to play outside of my own context, it was great,” (4/26/05). Versatility is what the conservatory provides, and

that is definitely a characteristic of Dorůžka's guitar work. When watching him perform, it becomes evident that he possesses the special trait of actually listening to his bandmates; he never overpowers people with his playing and he is not afraid to make breaks when necessary. This agreeable nature is accentuated by David's adorable, soft-spoken personality. He is an intense introvert, who is at his most expressive when playing music: at one moment in his performance, David unconsciously began moaning softly along with the notes that he played while his eyes were closed. Luckily for the audience, the microphone was able to pick up his voice, and the David's moaning was projected throughout the entire club.

However, this timid nature is a bit of an inhibition to Dorůžka in the sense that there is not anything particularly striking about his music. It is very well thought out and performed, but at the same time it is thoroughly monotone. In Dorůžka's latest album *Hidden Path*, the tracks seem to meld together into one drowsy stream, and thus not much is retained once the last track has finished. Monotonicity is certainly something that trio of guitar, bass and drums have to battle with, but it of course can be avoided. The problem lies in the fact that David is the frontman of his trio, and he as of now has nothing powerful to say. Jarda Pasmík adds: "I know that a few years ago he was trying to adapt Brad Mehldau's polyphonic style to the guitar, but I have not seen him do any of that recently," (5/03/05). If anything, Dorůžka's music seems like the standard type of album cut by an American conservatory student, and thus it suffers from the same problems of moving beyond its education, and discovering something new and experimental to say. It is possible that David is also stifled by the environment: he has older musicians in his band and has established himself in a scene that is mostly filled with artists from an older generation. David Dorůžka has plenty of skill and feeling, but at the same time is only twenty-five, and simply needs maturation," (Pasmik, 5/01/05)

Jakub Zitko and The New Fusion

Jakub Zitko, a twenty-three year old keyboardist, is the principal founder of the eight piece fusion orchestra NUO (Nuselky Umělecky Orchestr, which is a play on Vienna Art Orchestra, a group from Austria that plays a very similar type of music). Zitko and his bandmates have all received some form of jazz training, but this particular group that they are in is not specifically jazz. If NUO was an American band, they would be labelled as a “jam band,” for their danceable fusion of rock, jazz, funk, and electronica. Their concerts would probably be frequented neo-hippies and they would probably make most of their money appearing at different three-day summer festivals around the United States. Zitko admits that his group was influenced by the music of John Scofield and Medeski, Martin and Wood, who reside in the jazzier wing of jam band music. Jam bands are completely based on spontaneity and improvisation, thus these groups are quite conducive for experimentation. However, very often they don’t possess the skills or vision to fully develop a unique idea, and thus their projects end up as bland, amorphous and homogenous. However, NUO’s music possesses none of these negative qualities, because it is so new to the Czech Republic that they have had to create it largely out of nothing, and the result has been organic, exciting and unique. Specifically their horn arrangements have such a gorgeous, dry tone that makes their sound immediately recognizable.

NUO was born as Jakub Zitko’s senior project at Jaroslav Ježek Konservatoř: “I had Karel Ružíčka Sr. [famous Czech pianist] as my teacher and he is sixty-five but he thinks like he is young. He liked my project, they do like it when you do something different there, only most people don’t,” (4/29/05). Zitko adds that his band and other younger musicians in the Prague scene would have difficulty playing any older or standard form of jazz, because they have grown up listening to so many more types of music (4/29/05). The musicians from a generation like Milan Svoboda’s certainly explore many different types of music, but what makes NUO’s generation different is that these different styles have all affected the group’s music. Jakub specifically plays in a rock band, a blues band, an electronic band, and with a

pop singer. The group's sax and trumpet players are in the contemporary jazz group Vertigo, the drummer Miloš Dvořáček plays with Iva Bittová, etc. All of these elements can be heard in NUO's self-titled, whose tracks vary from Janaček-like string arrangements to electronic pop grooves to swanky Mingusesque brass choruses. It does not seem like the Prague jazz scene necessarily knows what to make of this project. "We have difficulty getting gigs here, part of it is that our band is too big to fit on many of the stages in the clubs here, but also I don't think most of the clubs want our type of music, I don't know if there is many people who want to see our music, we'll see," (4/29/05). However, there is in fact an audience for the group; they played to a nearly packed house of young people at May 5th show in Kaštan. NUO is important for Prague's jazz scene because they represent how jazz is growing outside of the traditional genre. Their music is independent and experimental; the only issue is how long will the band be together. NUO does not make any of its members very much money and needless to say they are all involved in other projects. Thus only time will tell how long this group will last.

Vojtech Prochazka and Czech Contemporary Jazz

Vojtech Prochazka's group, the Vertigo Quintet (piano, bass, saxophone, trumpet, drums) was a product of the jam sessions in U Maleho Glenu: this was where Vojtech, a twenty-three year old piano player met Slovakian drummer Daniel Solitis. "They are one of the few places that still have weekly sessions every Sunday. There was definitely a period in my life when I was going every week, that was how I met people," (Prochayka, 4/29/05). Already this indicates a difference in environment from the older generations: spontaneous experimentation is encouraged in public, which Vojtech's age group has benefited from since they were young. Thus, since Prochazka has been cultivating his style with his age group, it should come as no surprise that the music of his band is the jazz has a more fresh and contemporary feel to it. Vertigo is principally based out of the same pool of musicians as NUO (who have never had the music that they play politically restricted); both groups possess

an eclectic array of influences ranging from modern composers to Thelonius Monk to Bjork. However, what distinguishes Vertigo from NUO is that they blend foreign influences into the medium of jazz, rather than adapting jazz to an outside medium. Thus they can be seen as something more ingrained into the heritage of jazz. Vojtech's piano work especially reflects a variety of influences: the rational structure of his notes have an unquestionable tinge of Bach to them, while at the same time his half steps bare a Monk influence; then again one could also read in them a trace of Radiohead. What these three seemingly unrelated artists share in common is a minimalist, structural approach to music that until recently seemed to be quite dead in Czech jazz: Svoboda and his fellow Čezz comrades certainly fall guilty to musical masturbation, and while Naj Ponk broke music down to simplicity again, he did so only in the format of traditional bop. The Quintet's April 28th show at U Staré Paní revealed the sophistication of these younger players: There was nothing showy about the group: they integrated sound and silence with confidence and grace, none of them fearing to put breaks in their playing, while at the same time really exploring the capabilities of their instruments. The drummer Daniel Solitis in particular would never cause a racket on his kit, but would alter the meter and his sticks of choice creating a beautiful polyphony throughout the show. At the same time, the fiery but dry soprano sax solos of Marcel Bartá along Vojtech's dark and contemplative were just as important to the performance. After ten minutes, Vertigo had really succeeded in their own realm inside U Staré Paní. By no coincidence, of the groups that I saw this semester in this typically tourist heavy club, Vertigo drew the most Czechs.

It is incredibly hard to define what makes a particular artist more experimental than another, but nonetheless there are details that reveal the nature of the situation. One major aspect is that Vojtech and the artists of this generation of Czech jazz seemed to excited about the music that they were playing, as opposed to the older artists circulating in the scene. Additionally, these younger groups seem to draw more numbers of native Czechs, which possibly suggests that their music is more important to the local culture than that of the older

generation. Most importantly however, the strength of a group like Vertigo lies in the fact that they have already established their own unique sound that bares traces of influences but does not particularly sound like anything that has been established. They are labelled as “contemporary jazz,” however this genre title by no means establishes their identity. Unlike many of the older artists, their music does not seem to be locked inside of a particular genre of jazz. As Milan Svoboda forecasted: “Future form of jazz will be defined by the next big personality to create some thing completely new,” (4/26/05). Vertigo might just be this; however, like NUO, the bands musicians are young and most likely headed in different directions. “I have been thinking about applying to Berklee,” Vojtech explains, “but if I leave it won't be an end to the band or sometype of awkward replacement, the group will change, it will be a new phase,” (4/29/05). Thus is the nature of jazz.

V. Conclusion

Jazz as a medium based on improvisation is one that is condusive to experimentation by nature. Since it reflects the spontaneous nature of life, it was precisely the type of pasttime that the totalitarian regimes who dominated this country for nearly fifty years feared, and they sought to inhibit the freedom of the musicians that played it either through means of eradication or domination of the genre. After the Velvet Revolution, jazz experienced a brief honeymoon period, but since then a scene has developed that seems to be more defined by character types than experimentation. However, with the coming a younger generation that has grown up with more oportunites than the ones that preceded them, and the efforts of certain individuals in the scene to keep the music alive and moving forward, there is promise for artistic innovation in Prague’s jazz scene in the years to come. However, even experimentation can not change that for over fifty years, jazz has been more of an abstract genre appreciated by the few, rather than a music of the populus. As long as the music remains abstract, even drastic changes may not change its fate as the “new classical.”

VI. Research Evaluation

To quote John Moffitt, my ex-girlfriend's dad, changing the focus of my project from Milan Kundera to Prague's jazz scene was a “masterstroke.” I feared being pent-up in my room for the entire ISP month, while the flowers were blossoming, frantically reading as many works as I could, and all by the same cynical dude. I was not excited. Jazz was a good alternative because it allowed me to explore the outside world and meet many interesting people. I vividly remember riding the tram one Monday and thinking: “Wow, this is the first research period where I'm not locked inside some giant cinderblock with my face buried in some book that I am progressively becoming bored with.” It was great to have a research period in which I could move around and explore; I enjoyed this very much. Additionally, jazz was a smart topic to pick because it was something that I already knew about and could place into a historical context. This was very important, because I could understand how to define different artists that I came into contact with, because I was familiar with the music that had influenced them.

What is important to keep in mind when undertaking something as scary as an ISP is to keep moving forward, nothing hurts the final product more than indolence. There would be days when I would get up having not been very inspired by the events of the following day and look at the list of names that I could still contact with a sort of cynical indifference. Fortunately for me, I called these people and they drastically changed my project for the better: one of them became my advisor and the majority of them are cited in my paper. Another important thing to keep in mind is to not let the desire to establish a thesis keep you from acquiring new information. I did not have a clear thesis until two weeks ago, because I really felt that it was important to let the information dictate the conclusion, not likewise. It is also important to remember that you don't necessarily need to land the big shots to write a good ISP; the following are names of important people who could have been great for my paper: Lubomir Dorůžka (the most famous of all Czech jazz documentors), Jiří Stivín (the

most famous active Czech jazz musician), Jaroslav Honzak (head of Jaroslav Ježek conservatory), etc. You don't necessarily need big names to acquire substantive information. Additionally, most people only have a month to put the project together. If I had even one week more my ISP would be better, but nonetheless what I have is the best product that I could come up with in the time allotted. Of course it would have been better for me to start the ISP earlier, but it is more important to spend the time trying to figure out what the right topic is rather than simply starting the wrong ISP topic early. Lastly, it is important to give yourself a week to do the writing. It feels great not to be writing an essay while cracked out on energy drinks at four in the morning before it is due. Writing thirty-two pages seemed like a herculean task at first, but then I realized, that an ISP project is much like long distance running: its all about pacing baby.

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2. Jana Koubková and the EU Band (U Staré Paní, 4/8/05)
3. Naj Ponk Trio (4/21/05)
4. David Dorůžka Trio (U Staré Paní, 4/17/05)
5. Milan Svoboda Quartet (4/23/05)
6. Jaroslav Ježek Konservatoř Recital (4/26/05)
7. Vertigo Quintet (U Staré Paní, 4/28/05)
8. NUO (Kaštan, 5/5/05)

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5. David Dorůžka-*Hidden Path* (Cube & Metier, 2003)
6. NUO (Arta, 2003)
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